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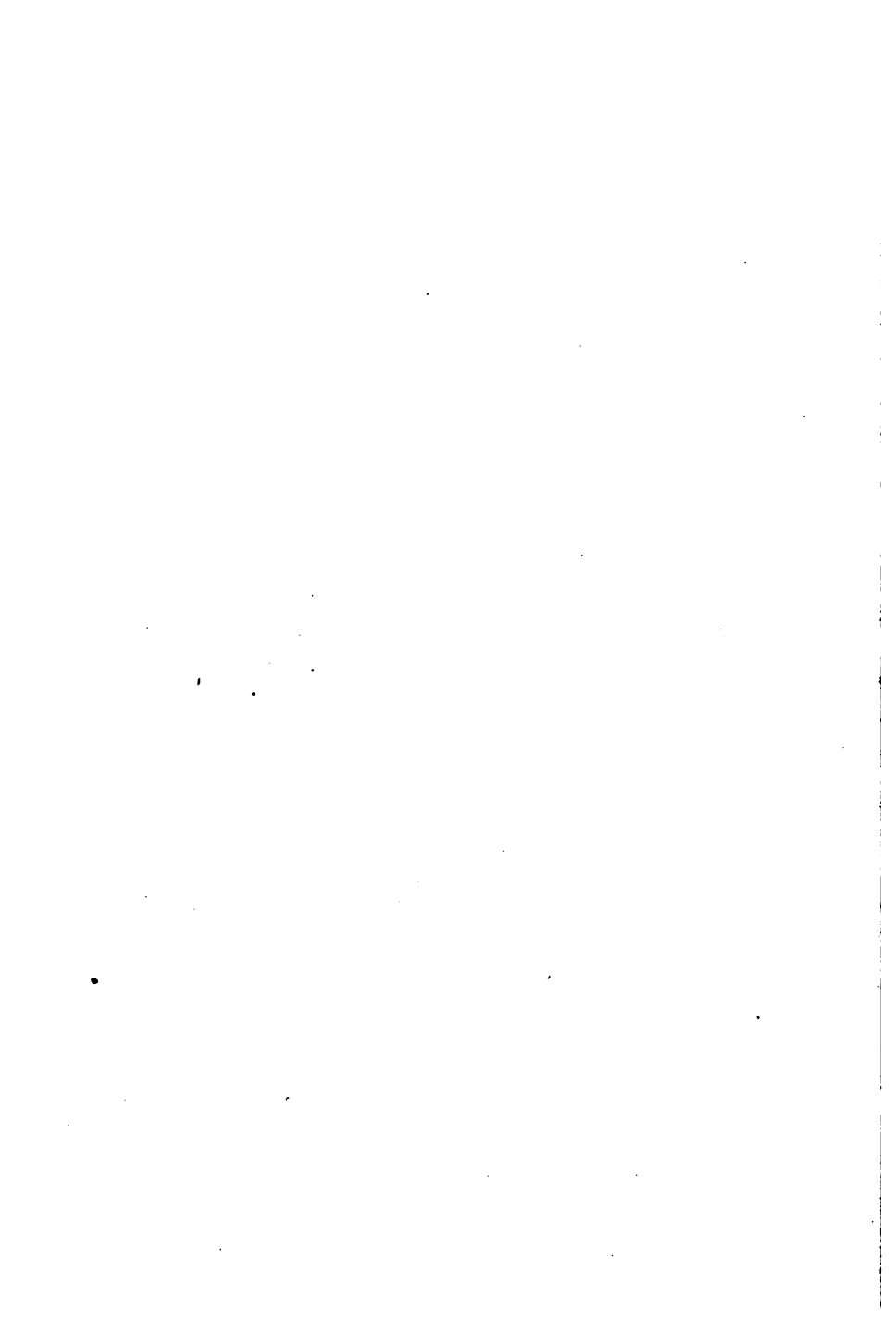
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MOLLY

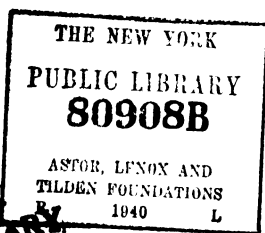
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To
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PART I
INTRODUCING THE WINTRINGHAMS

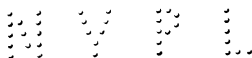
CHAPTER I

A LONG the dusty Hambletown road trudged a little girl of thirteen, carrying a large bundle and followed enviously by a dozen or more smaller children, some of them toddlers of three or four years, clad in rompers and accompanied by older sisters or brothers. Every now and then she stopped to shower kisses and caresses upon the bundle, and to talk to it endearingly; for it was nothing less than a baby, much wrapped in a soiled white cashmere shawl,—a solid-looking, comfortable, heavy baby, almost but not quite at the walking age.

At the church she stopped a moment to rest her arms by allowing the infant to repose upon the horse block, where he gazed with a wide, unblinking stare at the eager faces of the admirers that pressed around him in silent ecstasy.

At this stage in their progress the group was augmented by still other children, who were informed, in awed tones and with appropriate sobriety, that Molly Hastings had a baby and was going to take it home and adopt it for her very own.

Molly pulled her pink sunbonnet over her mop of black curly hair, gathered the placid infant in her arms once more, and struggled on up the hill that led toward home. After a few steps the bonnet was again dangling down her back, exposing her vivid red and white skin to the freckling process of the too intimate



sun, but Molly was quite unaware of it. Her remarkably large black eyes, which seemed somehow out of place in her thin little face, were ablaze with excitement.

Halfway between the church and the bridge, upon the railing of which she might again rest her charge and thus ease the increasing ache in her arms, she met her brother Hal, two years her junior but immeasurably her senior in loftiness of manner and instinctive grasp of the world of men and things. In appearance he was not unlike his sister, save that his cheeks lacked the color so noticeable in hers, and his eyes, instead of having the round, wistful, inquiring expression, which gave her such an air of childish naïvety, looked out on life with the steady, level, appraising gaze of a man.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, contempt visible in every lineament and even in the way in which he drew up his shoulders as he scanned the group surrounding his sister. There were times when Molly's irrepressible enthusiasm grated upon his sensibilities. This was one of them. He saw plainly by the exceeding redness of her cheeks and the brilliance of her eyes that she was excited.

"It's going to be mine, Hal!" she exclaimed. "Aren't you glad? You will be its uncle, for I shall adopt it."

"Aw—shucks!" Hal thrust his hands into his pockets with an aggravatingly superior, masculine air. "Grandpa an' Little Mama won't let you, an' I don't want to be its uncle anyway. Look at the way it squints!"

"It does not squint, and you are real mean. They will let me have it. They'd love to. And you shouldn't say 'shucks',—Little Mama told you not to; and you've



got your best suit on again, that I hid. How did you find it? I'll bet old Ellen told you where it was."

For answer Hal smiled a lofty smile and walked on, while Molly continued her struggling way, more struggling since her brother had thrust the prick of his skepticism into her confidence. More children had joined her by the time she reached the bridge, some with their hoops, others pushing their doll carriages, and still others content with keeping step with her and endeavoring to catch glimpses of the baby's face. It seemed to Molly that all the children in Hambleton were serving as escort—not, however, that it troubled her in the least. They were all numbered among her friends, from the greatest to the least.

Molly rested her bundle lengthwise on the railing of the bridge, and wrapped her arms around both, while the baby made futile dashes for her hair.

"Darling, we shall soon be home," she crooned into the small ear. "You shan't be a beggar baby any longer; no, you shan't."

The baby gurgled, and Molly smothered it with kisses.

"Good afternoon, Miss Molly."

It was Jack Gordon who spoke, a tall, fair-haired boy of sixteen, whose mother did day's work and took in washing. He was on his way home now, and the little two-wheeled cart, constructed by his own hands from a soap-box and wheels from a perambulator, contained soiled clothing. He was the only boy in the neighborhood who dignified Molly by prolonging her name with "Miss." He seemed to feel, however, that the granddaughter of a general should be so addressed.

"Good afternoon, Jack. I have a baby."

"I see you hev'," replied the boy. "He seems like a nice sort of a little chap, but he must be heavy. I was thinkin', as I come along, that he might set into this cart, and would like the ride. I go right by your house."

"He would!" exclaimed Molly, joyfully. "You'd love to, wouldn't you, darling?" She kissed the fat, dirty little face again, and with a sigh of relief transferred her armful to the well-stuffed laundry bag, which constituted an excellent substitute for a pillow, and the procession moved on, Molly pouring enthusiastically into the sympathizing ears of her humble knight the recital that Hal's taciturnity had not encouraged.

At the moment when the crowd of children, headed by Molly and Jack Gordon, surged over the hill, General Wintringham and his wife were sitting on the wide porch of Locust Cottage (their home for the past eight years), amid roses and honeysuckle and droning bees,—the very picture of rustic content.

Locust Cottage,—in reality not a cottage at all, but a quaint, rambling old farmhouse set amid an orchard of apple-trees and shaded by locusts and tall pines,—stood where two roads met, just far enough from the village to make it a pleasant walk to town. Upon its vine-covered porch at almost any time of day in summer, when he was not driving slowly along the country roads or overseeing his man cultivate his fields, passers-by might see "the old aristocrat" (as the people of the country around about called him, with a mingling of affection and respect) engaged in reading aloud to his wife from a manuscript, it being his wont to render permanent his philosophical reflections by putting them on paper. Once in a while,

however, it was Molly who furnished the audience. She had begun of late to evince, to her grandfather's delight, quite a remarkable interest in the abstract, and to respond with zest to the Socratic method, which he had employed upon her at mealtime ever since she sat in a high-chair. He had not as yet been successful in evoking a philosophic response from his grandson, but he did not despair even of him.

General Wintringham, who was verging close on seventy, was tall, amply proportioned, with cheeks as pink as a girl's and unusually large, bright blue eyes. He wore his thick, loosely curling white hair brushed back from his forehead after the manner of Lord Byron, as his always appears in his portraits, and it was whispered that some likeness between the two, when the general was a boy, had suggested the fashion. It was from him that Molly had inherited her clear red-and-white coloring, and even now the old man's skin was almost free from lines. In his Sunday attire he was the pride of the countryside as he walked up the central aisle of the church, his small, fair-haired wife clinging to his arm.

The pair on the porch might have witnessed the phenomenon of the approaching mob of children at its first appearance upon the crest of the hill had they raised their eyes; but the general was reading aloud, as usual, and his wife was hemming what appeared to be a blue gingham frock. As a rule, she sat with folded hands, since her husband disapproved of sewing; not only was it said to deplete the nervous system, but it detracted from his enjoyment as well. No woman could sew and at the same time give her undivided attention to such problems as, for instance, those involved in the present original treatise—"The

Development of Berkleian Idealism into the Idealism of Lotze."

At length, however, he looked up for the purpose of resting, not his eyes, but his nose, upon the end of which his glasses perched, the upper portion not being fitted to accommodate them. He had a deep-rooted antipathy to spectacles, since they savored of old age.

"Margaret, what is that?" In spite of the fact that the pain occasioned by the abnormal pinching had not left the end of his nose, the general replaced his glasses and rose to his feet.

"Why, it's Molly!" Mrs. Wintringham followed his example, allowing her work to drop to the porch.

"But who is that man with her, and what does that mob of children mean, and what has she in the cart?"

"I can't imagine, Henry. Perhaps it is another sick animal. It is a boy, not a man. It is Jack Gordon."

At the gate the train halted.

"Don't come in, children," said Molly. "There are so many of you, and grandfathher doesn't like to have the front lawn trampled down. You may watch us from the fence. But you may come, Jack." She added this last graciously and started up the path, the baby clasped triumphantly in her aching little arms, her eyes no longer blazing, but soft and shining, now that she had reached her journey's end.

The general and his wife still stood awaiting expectantly the presentation of the usual ailing creature, but at Molly's first words the general sat down abruptly, allowing his manuscript to slip to the floor, where it lay unheeded beside the blue gingham gown.

"I've brought you a baby, Little Mama," she cried,

joyfully. "I am going to adopt him, and I will take all the care of him, except while I am at school, and then Old Ellen will. She loves children, you know, especially babies. And you won't have any bother at all, except to play with it when you want to. He is the best baby ever was, isn't he, Jack? And Jack says that sometimes he will give him a ride in his cart."

If Mrs. Wintringham felt consternation at this novel presentation, she gave no sign of it. She bent over the child, which for the first time began to cry, and taking him into her arms, seated herself in the rocker and began with practiced hand to undo the wrappings.

"It is no wonder that the poor little fellow is uncomfortable," she said, as soon as she could command her voice. "He has on almost enough clothing for winter."

She threw off the grimy white shawl.

"He must belong to well-to-do people. See how fine his little dress is. Where did you get him, dear? Tell us about it. You look completely tired out."

"That's because I carried him all the way from the village, until I met Jack. His name is Harold and he hasn't any other, so I shall give him mine. Harold Hastings will be a beautiful name, so poetic! It is alliteration, though I only thought of that just now. I got him from a woman."

"Where did the woman go?"

"She said he wasn't hers, and that his mother was dead. She could not afford to support him and had to leave town on the very next train. It went in fifteen minutes; so, of course, I said I'd take him."

"He is a very nice little baby, dear," said Mrs. Wintringham, as she rocked gently back and forth;

"and I should like to keep him and bring him up, if I were only younger, but a little baby is a great care, Molly. I am afraid that it would not be possible for us to attempt it. A baby, you know, needs attention at night, and none of us are strong enough for that."

"I am, Little Mama. Please let me have him." Tears gushed from Molly's eyes and down her cheeks. She had never wanted anything so much in all her life as she wanted this baby to be her very own. "I'll take all the care of him, and carry him to school with me in Jack's cart. The janitor would amuse him part of the time, and I'd feed him out of a bottle at both recesses."

"Your grandmother knows what is best, my dear." It was the general who spoke for the first time. Thus far he had felt the situation to be entirely beyond him. "He will be very well cared for at the orphanage in the village."

"Oh, Grandfather!" Molly wailed. "He will be nothing but an orphan then, without any home or any mother to love him. The Bible says, 'For inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto Me.'"

General Wintringham drew out his pocket-handkerchief and applied it to his nose. It was very affecting to see the flowering of his own teachings in this touching albeit disconcerting fashion.

"I have it!" Mrs. Wintringham's face brightened. She found it very hard to hurt Molly.

"What?" queried the little girl, hopefully drying her tears.

"Suppose we carry him to the Home, with the understanding that he is to be your baby, and that you are to see him as often as you want to? I have no

doubt but that you can be a great help to the nurses in caring for him, and Harold will really be so much better off. You see, Molly, in such a place they have the very newest methods, and you would in all probability learn much that even I do not know, and that you would be able to teach me."

Molly's face cleared. The last suggestion offered delightful possibilities. To teach Little Mama! Molly loved to teach anybody anything.

"Could I wash him, and dress and undress him, and rock him to sleep?" she inquired.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit."

"Well, all right, Little Mama. But I did so want to have him sleep in my room, and pull up the covers over him when it is cold, as you do for me."

It was evident that the battle was won, and Mrs. Wintringham turned to Jack with a sigh of relief. He had been standing a silent but interested observer, and in his eyes as they rested on Molly's face was an expression of shy admiration.

"Thank you, Jack, for helping Molly with her baby. Harold is really a very big boy for a little girl to carry."

"I could haul him to the Home for you in my cart," he volunteered. This offer Mrs. Wintringham declined.

"That is good in you, Jack, but Molly, I am sure, will want to see just what arrangements are made for him, and I shall go with her. Perhaps as you pass through the yard you will ask Ludwig to harness Charlie to the double carriage."

Jack touched his battered straw hat and moved off toward the barn.

Mrs. Wintringham again addressed Molly.

"And you, my dear, run up to your room and change your dress. Don't forget to wash your face and hands and arrange your hair. You'd better send Ellen here."

When Molly had departed the general turned to his wife with admiration in his eyes.

"As I have often said, Margaret, you are the most remarkable of your sex. You handled that affair in a masterly fashion. For a moment I did not see how we were to evade the responsibility without shattering the child's ideals,—her faith in us as exemplifying Christian precept. A child's ideals are not to be tampered with lightly. But who could have foreseen such a contingency!"

"It is really an outworking of the maternal instinct," replied his wife. "I don't know what we are going to do with Molly. She literally rages up and down the land in search of some one to mother. Last year it was Daisy Dennis. I never dreamed, when she began to teach her, that she would stick to it until she had enabled her to skip a class."

"A wonderful instinct, if properly directed," said the general.

"But a menace to Molly herself unless it does become properly directed. Hal resents it, and shows it, though I know that he loves her with all his little heart. His behavior hurts her, though."

"Oh, they will come out all right," predicted the general, comfortably; "children will be children. All of them have their little quarrels, that is, if they are worth their salt. Did you ever see a boy walk as our boy walks? I tell you what, Margaret, blood will tell every time. You'd know that he was a gentleman by his carriage alone. He will turn out all right, you mark my words."

"An' be th' saints above! May the Lord presarve us, en' is it a baby ye're holdin', mum?"

Old Ellen, fat, white-haired, and sixty, with the face of a madonna, held out her arms.

"An' shure he's a foine little feller fer ye. An' diddle-de-diddle-de-diddle-de-dee," she sang, swaying the infant back and forth in her arms to its very evident delight. "The little darlint!"

"Keep him, Ellen, until I put on my hat," said Mrs. Wintringham. "Carry him into the dining-room. We are going to take him to the Home. It is a little orphaned boy."

"God pity him!" said Ellen piously, as she went indoors. "Did Miss Molly bring him?"

"Yes."

"It was a sick dog lasht toime. Aye, but she's improvin'. A baby is better nor a dog, sick or well."

A few moments later General Wintringham, accompanied by his wife and granddaughter, the latter holding tenderly in her arms the now sleeping baby, moved slowly up the road in the comfortable family carriage, followed in the distance by the same horde of small boys and girls that had formed Molly's body-guard on her homeward way half an hour before. .

CHAPTER II

"I AM so happy, Little Mama!"

Molly stopped embroidering for a few moments to gaze dreamily up at the patches of clear blue sky visible here and there through the twining vines.

"It is wonderful to have a baby of my very own," she continued, without waiting for a reply. "Not one of the other girls has. When I went to see him yesterday he knew me and held out his arms; and you ought to see him since he is clean. He is beautiful! When I asked if I could see Harold Hastings, the nurse knew right away who I meant, and she seemed so pleased. It was the pretty one, who has such deep dimples when she smiles. She said it was a lovely name. Perhaps making this cap for him will teach me to like embroidery. A baby is a great responsibility."

She ended with a contented sigh, and turned again to her work.

"Yes, indeed, it is, dear." Mrs. Wintringham smoothed back the soft little wisps of curls from Molly's temples and straightened her red bow. "But you mustn't neglect your studies, you know. When Harold grows up he will look to you for example and teaching, and so you must make the very best of every opportunity."

"That's so," assented the little girl. "I hadn't thought of that. Suppose some day he should come

to me and say, 'Mother, what is the future tense of *amo?*' and I didn't know! I should be so mortified that I should scarcely be able to speak. I think I'd better study a little while before luncheon, even if it is Saturday."

School had been in session for one week, and Molly was struggling with her first Latin conjugation. In a moment she broke into conversation again.

"Wasn't it wonderful, Little Mama, about that check? Mr. Smith must have been a very honest man to pay his father's old outlawed debt."

"Yes, indeed," replied Mrs. Wintringham, smiling at her granddaughter's enthusiasm, which overflowed into her every act and every speech. "Such behavior renews one's faith in human nature. I suppose that grandfather is having a delightful time among the stores."

"Twenty-five dollars is a lot of money," said Molly. "Grandfather can get everything that we need, can't he? I hope that he won't forget my hat. I can't go to Genevieve Wells's garden party if he does. All the girls are going to wear hats, and that old black sailor wouldn't look a bit nice."

"He won't forget." Mrs. Wintringham spoke soothingly and returned to her darning. "He has a complete list with him, and you know how he enjoys shopping."

They were sitting in the rose arbor, into which Molly had conveyed chairs, footstools, a table, and a rug, in honor of what was to her one of the pleasantest events of the year—General Wintringham's absence from Locust Cottage for one entire day. It was not that his presence there was ever otherwise than agreeable, but that upon these rare occasions she and

her grandmother were left free to visit uninterruptedly from the moment when the carriage turned up Bedlam Alley on its way to the station until it drew up before the gate at night.

There was very little money in the Wintringham family, so little that the uninitiated wondered how they contrived to live as they did and hire service, but the explanation lay in the general's perennial black suits,—one for everyday, one for Sunday, and one for state occasions,—which had not been renewed for the last ten years, but which, by reason of their quality, still retained their pristine freshness of shape and color, and would as long as the material endured; as well as in Mrs. Wintringham's two best gowns, brave relics of forty years ago. Even at this late day they were able of a Sunday to put to shame the combined efforts of the rest of the congregation by reason of the richness of their texture, which more than counterbalanced the antiqueness of their fashion. In addition to this, there was an air about Mrs. Wintringham that lent distinction to whatever she wore, and the gowns were especially suited to her.

Molly's clothing and Hal's came usually from their Aunt Emma Hastings, who lived in New York and had, at one time, sought favors of the general and his wife, but who, since the loss of the general's fortune, had contented herself with sending to them yearly bundles of her children's and her own cast-off clothing.

It was, however, very excellent cast-off clothing, and provided a natural method of becoming replenished, since it was strictly a family affair. Molly's best dress of rose-colored cashmere had belonged to her cousin Clair, and Hal's best brown suit, which for mysterious reasons he had been stealing of late to wear during

play hours, to the imminent danger of its total destruction, had once been worn by Rupert.

It was already nearing eleven o'clock, and Molly and her grandmother had visited delightfully for over two hours,—the little girl talking chiefly of her newly acquired possession, and Mrs. Wintringham telling the stories which Molly loved best to hear,—stories of the days before her mother was born, when white-sailed boats moved lazily up and down the Hudson, and Bowling Green was a park where children might wheel their dolls and buy lemonade and peanuts. As much as she loved her husband and enjoyed his society, Mrs. Wintringham no less than her granddaughter reveled in these annual vacations, when for a few brief hours she might mend stockings without anxiety as to nervous disorders liable to result therefrom, or divide her attention between her work and philosophical problems whose full import she might not grasp should she allow her thoughts to wander.

"I'd better stop embroidering now for a little while and study my verbs." Molly rose as she spoke. "I won't be a minute; my grammar is in the dining-room."

She stepped to the lawn, but shrank back into the seclusion of the arbor again, for at that moment a brougham, upon whose box sat a liveried coachman, stopped before the gate of the cottage. There was only one brougham in town.

"It's Mrs. Heaton," she whispered, peering between the vines, "and she is coming up the walk. Why did she have to come to-day, when we were having such a lovely time, and you don't even know her! She could just as well have chosen some other day."

Molly accompanied her grandmother to the house,

secured her grammar, and returned to the arbor; but it was not until she remembered that she owned a baby, whose future success in life was being endangered by her lapse in attention, that she was able to concentrate her thought on the pages before her. After that she forgot the passage of time until she heard the click of the gate as the visitor passed through it on her way to the carriage. A moment later her grandmother joined her, her delicate face unusually flushed and smiling, her eyes, which had been like Molly's when she was young, sparkling with fun.

Molly sprang to her feet.

"What is it, Little Mama? What did she want? Something nice; I can see it in your face."

Mrs. Wintringham resumed her seat.

"Where do you suppose Hal goes," she asked, "dressed up in his best suit?"

"I don't know. Not to the Beeches!" Molly added this last uncertainly, for she read corroboration in her grandmother's eyes.

"Yes, to call on little Gertrude Heaton, who is only eight years old. He has been doing it for weeks, and he always carries her a bunch of pansies."

"And I know where he gets them," Molly exclaimed, excitedly; "he steals them out of Judge Milbank's garden—I saw him come out of there with some the other day—only it isn't really stealing, because he is away and the pansies would just waste. There are packs of them there. But it is very strange. Hal simply hates girls, and won't even say hello to Daisy, though she is my best friend, and he won't walk to Sunday school with me ever."

"It seems that Gertrude was driving around the grounds of the Beeches," explained Mrs. Wintring-

ham, resuming her darning, "one day several weeks ago when Hal was going by, and the little Shetland pony became unmanageable and tried to run through the gate to the road outside. Hal stopped it and drove her back, and since then they have been fast friends. Mrs. Heaton spoke beautifully of him and said that he was a perfect little gentleman."

"She wasn't saying it in fun, was she, Little Mama?"

"No, dear, I think not. We must never hide the brown suit again. It is on these visits that he wears it, poor little fellow. He is going to see Gertrude this afternoon."

"He had it on day before yesterday," said Molly, "when I was bringing Harold home, and I scolded him right on the road. I am awfully sorry that I did. I'll get it out of the secret cupboard right away, for he can never find it. It is good I didn't think of hiding it there first. Ellen said that he put on his rubbers to keep from slipping yesterday when he found the attic door was locked, and climbed up the roof to the attic window."

"But how did he know where to look for it? It was in a barrel, wasn't it, in the farthest corner? There are several barrels up there."

"Ellen had to tell him, for he said he'd joggle the oven door and make her cake fall if she didn't. I'm glad that Ellen doesn't know about the secret cupboard. I'll do it now."

Without more words she ran headlong across the lawn to the house, her black curls streaming behind her. She did not go in at the kitchen door, for she desired to avoid the old woman who was seated in the

kitchen window busy with her primer, out of which she was endeavoring to learn to read.

"Ah—bey—tsay—day," Molly could hear her crooning. Quietly she made her way around to the front of the house. Once in the dining-room and having ascertained that there was no sound of movement in the kitchen, she secured a chair and, placing it before the mantelpiece, mounted to a level with a cupboard about which there seemed to be no hint of privacy. She opened the door, disclosing two shelves, upon which stood a few old magazines and a tall bottle of ink together with some rolls of wall paper, which were laid against the right-hand partition of the upper shelf. It was a very innocent-looking cupboard, but alas! in its innocence lay its deception. The top shelf extended two feet farther to the right than the under one,—a fact not discernible to the casual observer. And Molly, reaching over the craftily disposed rolls of paper, drew from out its hiding a clothing box, which contained the cherished brown suit.

CHAPTER III

MOLLY awoke from her nap in a state of depression unusual to her. It was still Saturday and her grandfather was as yet in New York, engaged no doubt in purchasing the so much needed outfit for winter. From her window she could see her grandmother sitting in the arbor just as she had left her, busy over her darning, but beside her sat Mrs. Dennis, whose farm adjoined the general's. At her appearance, joy had taken wings. Even from the house her voluble tones were plainly distinguishable as she rehearsed her week's troubles, and Molly knew from experience that she would remain until it was time to prepare her own supper. Nevertheless, the advent of Mrs. Dennis was not directly responsible for the drop in the little girl's spirits, although had she remained at home the events of the last hour before Molly's nap might not have taken place.

Molly put on her sunbonnet and strayed over the orchard to the field beyond, where Ludwig and Jack Gordon bent over the earth. Jack had been in school with her for five or six weeks during the preceding winter. He was much older than the rest of the class, but he had never been able to attend school for more than two or three months in the year. She seated herself in the large armchair from which it was her grandfather's wont to direct operations in the field, and fell to speculating upon Jack. It must be hard, she

thought, to work hour after hour like a man, and not play with other boys of his age. He never acted like a boy nor talked like a boy, and there was a dignity and aloofness about him which Molly had felt even in their superficial acquaintance, although she had not been able to analyze it.

While she looked, the bending figure in the blue overalls straightened itself and then began to move toward the tree where she sat. She watched with interest the blur of lightish brown become a sunburned face out of which gazed a pair of honest blue eyes.

"Good afternoon, Miss Molly." The boy respectfully removed his ragged straw hat. "It's a nice day, ain't it?"

"Yes," replied Molly.

"I thought I'd come over and see how the baby was gettin' along. You got him in the Home all right, I hear."

"Yes," replied Molly, "and they were ever so glad to have him. He is the cutest baby you ever saw, now that he is clean, although he was lovely at first, too. I saw him yesterday."

Jack had not replaced his hat, but stood shifting from foot to foot, evidently ready for an interchange of friendly pleasantries, yet not sufficiently at ease to seat himself at her feet.

"Sit down, Jack, won't you?" Molly spoke in quite a lofty manner, born of the consciousness of Jack's respect.

"Thank you," he returned, "I am done for the day. I was only engaged for the morning."

"But you've worked some this afternoon."

"Oh, that's all right." Jack tossed his hat on the ground and then stretched himself out flat, his elbows

resting on the grass, his chin in his palms. "Ludwig wanted me to help him a while longer."

"But grandfather will pay you for it. I shall tell him to."

"No, Miss Molly," Jack said, sitting up; "you must not."

"Yes, I shall," Molly declared, in a burst of sympathy and generosity, "and grandfather will pay you."

Jack looked steadily at her out of his quiet eyes. "You must not, Miss Molly," he said, gravely; "it is a private matter between me and the general."

Molly gave a little gasp. No one had ever spoken so to her before. She blushed furiously, dropped her eyes, and to her own astonishment, heard herself murmur weakly, "Excuse me," and then, to her further astonishment, her tears began to flow.

"Don't cry, Miss Molly," the boy rose to his knees. "Please don't cry. It was kind of you and you can if you want to,—honest, you can."

He had caught up his hat and was demolishing it between his twisting fingers.

"I'm not crying for that," Molly protested, "it's something else."

"What is it?" he asked. His face was as red as hers with shame at his own bearishness.

Molly dried her eyes.

"Will you promise never to tell?" she inquired.

"I promise," replied the boy.

"Well," she replied, "it is this. I have no tact, and Little Mama says that it is going to make my pathway hard in life. I've got to learn it, and I don't know how, for it never happens twice in exactly the same way, so I can't be prepared. Hal calls me Snoopy and Miss Butt-in-sky."

She ceased speaking, and Jack's face grew a shade more serious. He did not know the meaning of the word "tact." A flush mounted to his cheeks and he cleared his throat. He would have to let the little girl see into the depths of his ignorance if he would help her.

But Molly misinterpreted his silence.

"I know that it is dreadful," she continued, apologetically, "and that you won't respect me so much now. Little Mama says that tact and policy are two different expressions of the same trait. She says that a tactful person uses his knowledge of human nature to say and do things to make people feel happy, just because he likes to see them happy, but that a politic person uses that same knowledge not to make people happy for their own sakes, but to get himself liked and to get what he wants out of them."

"I see," replied the boy, an expression of relief crossing his face.

"She wants me to be tactful but not politic," Molly went on more cheerfully, "and I do want to be, for I love to make people happy; only I haven't any knowledge of human nature."

She ceased speaking and this time awaited Jack's answer.

"Did you do something that didn't show no tact?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied Molly. "Mrs. Heaton called to-day. You know who she is,—the very rich woman who built the Beeches and has only been in Hambletown for two months?"

"Yes, I know," answered the boy. "I go there to help the gardener sometimes."

"Well, she came first because Hal told her that

Grandfather and Little Mama never made calls, and she wanted to know the grandparents of such a little gentleman. She called Hal a 'little gentleman.' There was pride in Molly's voice as she quoted Mrs. Heaton's words.

"I didn't know as Hal was friends with Mrs. Heaton."

"He is a friend of Gertrude Heaton's," explained Molly, "the beautiful little girl with golden hair. You see," she added, brokenly, "I had wanted Hal to marry Daisy, so that she would be my sister: not now, of course, but you often read in books, and Little Mama says that most books are founded on real life, that boys and girls lots of times grow to love each other and keep right on until they are big enough to marry. There would only be ten more years,—Hal has lived nearly eleven already. He is two years younger than I."

A quick spasm passed over her listener's face. It might have been due to a desire to laugh, or to the sting of a mosquito at which he slapped viciously. Jack was as old for his age as Molly was young for hers, which made the equivalent of some five or six years between their points of view. It was only in the matter of book knowledge that she had the advantage.

"That's so," he nodded gravely. "One half the time gone already." His eyes twinkled disconcertingly.

"Only Hal doesn't like Daisy," Molly explained. "He doesn't even think that she is beautiful. You think so, don't you, Jack?"

"Well," he rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "she has pretty pink cheeks, but I know some one I think a heap better looking, though I don't set up to be no judge."

He looked at her in an entirely new and personal way, and smiled in an entirely new and personal way, so that Molly knew that he meant her.

She blushed with delight.

"Oh, Jack," she cried, forgetting her own distress and Hal's unkindness, "you don't mean me, do you?"

"Sure I do," he replied.

"Why, I have freckles, and my hair is black, and my face is thin, and——"

"Nonsense," Jack threw back his head and laughed. "Freckles make the rest of the skin look all the whiter, and they don't show much anyway when your cheeks are so pretty and red, and I like a thin face,—you can see the shape of it. Daisy is too fat."

"That's what Hal says." A note of content crept into Molly's voice. Usually it made her angry to have any one call plump little Daisy fat, but to-day she did not seem to mind.

Molly's ideas of love had been derived from the Sunday-school books in which she reveled, but, strange to say, she had not as yet applied them to herself. She had spent delicious hours in planning the future of Daisy and Hal, but when she contemplated her own future, it was usually in terms of an unlimited number of children, for whom it had always been one of her favorite pastimes to choose names, Biblical ones preferred. Molly never thought of herself as a sweet-heart or a wife, but always as a mother.

"Wouldn't Hal fall in love with her?" queried Jack, leading her gently back to the subject in hand.

"No," replied Molly. "I told Daisy not to be discouraged—because that is the way it was in the 'Prince's Wooing'! He was a woman-hater at first, like Hal, but he relented."

Another spasm of laughter flitted across her listener's face.

"How does Daisy feel about Hal?"

"I don't think that she cares very much about him," Molly confessed. "She said that he was too little and thin. She likes George O'Halloran better. But it is all right, now that Hal loves Gertrude Heaton. Mrs. Heaton said that they were devoted to each other, and, of course, devotion means love. Little Mama says that none of us must so much as mention it to Hal. Hal is very sensitive."

She grew pensive again, and Jack perceived that they were nearing the subject lying heavy on her heart.

"Did you hurt Hal's feelings?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied Molly; "and he hurt mine, only I did it first, and I don't know how because I don't understand human nature."

"What did you do?"

Jack had turned inquisitor.

"I laid out his brown suit on the bed (the one we used to hide before we knew where he wore it), and shined his best shoes, and laundered a handkerchief, and put a rose in his buttonhole. I did it after Mrs. Dennis called. Mrs. Heaton said that he was going to see Gertrude this afternoon. Then I got on my bed, way up toward the top, where he couldn't see me as he passed my door. I thought he'd be glad, but he wasn't. He slammed both doors to his room, and then he opened the door into my room again and threw the rose in and the handkerchief. After he went out I fell asleep."

She waited for Jack's verdict.

"I guess," said he, looking at her understandingly, "that he wanted it for his own secret, and when he seen

his clothes all ready for him, he knew you'd found out. It was the same as tellin' him."

"It was, wasn't it?" said Molly, in a tone of surprise, "and Little Mama said I mustn't,—only I never thought of it that way."

Her face fell.

"But it was very sweet of you, just the same. I wish I had a sister like you."

"Do you, Jack?" She brightened. "But you might get angry if I told you not to say 'ain't.' Hal does."

The slow color crept over the boy's face until it lost itself in the roots of his yellow hair.

"Excuse me," again Molly heard herself murmuring, "I didn't mean——"

"That's all right," he looked her straight in the face. "I'd give anything in the world to have some one tell me. What mistakes hev I made to-day?"

Molly hung her head shyly under his gaze. Somehow she did not feel quite so complete as usual, quite so sure of herself.

"Well——" she hesitated.

"Go on," he said. There was an undertone of fierceness in his voice.

"You said 'ain't' and 'me and the general,' and 'I don't set up to be no jedge,' and 'seen.'"

"What should I have said?"

"'Isn't,' " replied Molly, promptly, "and 'the general and me,' and 'I don't pretend to be a judge'—'jedge', not 'jedge'—and 'saw.'"

"Thank you," murmured Jack, looking away.

"You are not angry?" Molly spoke timidly.

"No, Miss Molly." He looked at the ground for some time and then turned to her again. "My father was an educated man," he said. "He lost everything

in Wall Street and died. I was only six years old. There wasn't no one to help my mother, so she began to do housework for other people. There wasn't nothing—anything," he corrected himself, "else that she could do, and I ain't had much schooling."

"I am so sorry for you, Jack," Molly spoke very softly.

"But if I could only see you once in a while, just for a few moments like this, only once in a while," he pleaded, "and you could tell me about the words I say wrong——"

But he did not finish. Molly's face blazed with happiness.

"Oh, Jack!" her voice pealed out triumphantly, "I'd love to! I could give you regular lessons!"

"But I haven't no time, except evenings."

"'Any time,'" corrected Molly, now mistress of herself and of the situation.

"'Any time.' Thank you." Jack spoke humbly.

"Well," Molly said, meditatively, "I could give you every Friday evening. I could show you the work that we had done in school during the week."

"And I could study all the other nights!"

The look of maturity fled from Jack's face before this great joy that had come so suddenly into his life, and he became all boy. His eyes sparkled. "Oh, Miss Molly," he exclaimed, "you can't know what this means to me! I wish there was something I could do for you."

Molly's emotions turned themselves upside down and her view of life changed all in a moment. Hal and his churlishness seemed a long way off. There was some one in the world who needed help, who reached out his hands to her.

CHAPTER IV

"**H**OW many sons had Abraham?" asked Mrs. Wintringham. She and Molly stood in the front hall, Molly with her hand upon the catch of the screen door, ready to run upon a moment's notice.

"Two, Isaac and Ishmael; and Ishmael's hand was against every man and every man's hand was against him. Isaac was Sarah's child and Ishmael was Hagar's, and Sarah was jealous of Hagar, and she ought to have been, for Abraham committed bigamy, and I don't see how God allowed it anyway: but just the same, it wasn't Hagar's fault, because Abraham was a patriarch and so his subjects had to mind him, only he might have married some one else besides a servant girl. I don't wonder Sarah was mad, and Abraham was mean to send her off into the desert, with a little baby. Why, if God hadn't tended to them, they would have died!"

Molly ceased, and Mrs. Wintringham breathed deeply, as though it were she who had done the talking.

"Wait a moment, dear," she said. "There is plenty of time. Abraham had eight sons, not two. After Sarah died he married a woman named Keturah. She had six children, who became the ancestors of the Midianite tribes. And he did not commit bigamy. It was the custom of the country to have more than one wife, and moreover, my dear, Abraham was not in

the least unkind to Hagar. He sent her and her baby off with a fine escort to protect them to another camp which he owned, where she was much happier than she would have been in the camp with Sarah. Now run along."

Mrs. Wintringham kissed Molly's surprised face and patted her out of the front door.

"I don't altogether like this new idea of Molly's." The general poised his cup in midair and glanced up at his wife as she re-entered the dining-room.

"Which one?" she inquired, humorously. "Molly has a new idea on an average of several times a day."

"About helping Jack Gordon."

"It may prove an excellent thing for them both."

"Perhaps." The general gazed out of the window.

"Molly needs an absorbing occupation." Mrs. Wintringham sighed as she spoke. "Her vitality is something that I have never experienced in all my life."

"Molly is thirteen," mused the general.

"Yes," his wife smiled, "but she is the veriest baby for all that. Outside of books and fairy tales and the capacity for building air castles, she is just about five years old. Why, stupid little Daisy Dennis is more grown up than she. She sews like a woman, and has started a chest."

"A chest?" inquired the general, hopelessly.

"Yes,—for linen. She is making her wedding pillow-cases already, embroidering her initials on them. By the time she is seventeen or eighteen the chest will be full, and she will carry it into the house of some thrifty young farmer and settle down for life. Molly will then be almost as young as she is now. She will be devoted to Jack, I can see that already, and spend all

her available time in planning for him, just as she will for the baby. But she feels the difference—never fear. Those things are bred in the bone, you know; not, of course, that I want her to be a prig—far from it, I try to make her realize that we are all equal in the sight of God.”

“Quite right, my dear.” The general nodded. “We must never let the children imagine that in this great and glorious land, for whose freedom and welfare so many of her sons fought and bled and died, any one individual is, by mere accident of birth, superior to any other individual.” During this speech his voice trembled with emotion. He had many stirring memories of camp and battlefield.

“On the whole,” continued Mrs. Wintringham, when her husband had grown calm again, “I am glad that she has found some one besides the baby to mother. It is my opinion that the woman who palmed him off on her stole him, perhaps in hope of blackmailing the parents, and became frightened. His clothing is exquisitely fine. If he is ever claimed,—and I hope that he will be, poor little fellow,—it would cause Molly more suffering than a child ought to endure, that is, unless she has some one else to take his place.”

Mrs. Wintringham seated herself at the round table before the large silver urn, which the general insisted upon having used on Sunday mornings. She was wearing the gown that Molly particularly admired. The underskirt was of dark blue velvet, the waist and polonaise of blue and black brocaded satin, with duchess lace at the neck and sleeves.

“There goes Jack now,” she said, as she glanced toward the road.

“He walks very well indeed,” admitted the general, “quite like a gentleman.”

"You forget that his father——"

"Yes, but I was thinking of his mother."

"Of course——" assented Mrs. Wintringham.

"I don't know but that he would enjoy my lecture on the early Greek philosophers," went on her husband hopefully. He was not in the habit of adapting his conversation to the intellect of his listeners. He believed in letting the intellect grow.

His wife controlled a desire to smile, and rested serious eyes upon the eager old man, who was in some respects so remarkably like his granddaughter.

"I should not wonder at all," she answered.

"What a pity it is," continued he, "that there is no one to help the mother and keep him in school, although I suppose that they would refuse assistance. They're that kind. To think of the father's marrying his mother's maid! However, he paid dearly for it! If I were not such a battered old hulk, with barely enough money to keep Molly and Hal from the orphan asylum, I'd take that boy and bring him up."

Mrs. Wintringham glanced affectionately at the ruddy-cheeked, immaculate old man before her.

"I should not call you exactly worn out, my dear," she protested. "You look younger every year. White hair means nothing at all nowadays, and I am sure that our poverty is not of a degrading kind—not in the least. What difference do a few dollars more or less make, as long as we are able to help the children grow up into gentlefolk?"

"Quite so," assented the general, holding his shoulders back a trifle and twirling the ends of his moustache. "But we must not forget that they are of gentle birth to begin with. Blood will tell. Think of that boy of ours visiting at the Beeches!"

His wife smiled. "Yes," she said, "imagine it! Hal,

who has scorned the society of girls and refused absolutely to clean his nails, actually stealing his best clothes to call on Gertrude Heaton! Henry, did I tell you that she is only eight years old? Isn't it delicious!"

"The Heatons are very wealthy, I believe," murmured the general.

"Many times a millionaire," acquiesced his wife.

"Sometimes enduring friendships are begun in childhood."

"Who knows but that something might come of it in the future?" Mrs. Wintringham carried her husband's thought to its conclusion, but he was quick to repudiate the implication.

"We must not allow ourselves to dwell on such remote possibilities." He spoke severely. "We should be just as glad to have Hal call upon her were she as poor as the lad who has just passed the house."

The general always appeared his best on Sunday. There was not a parishioner but who could have told you whether he was or was not within the sacred edifice upon any particular Sunday. He bathed every morning in cold water; every morning also he dipped his head of long, thick, fine, curling hair into the basin and rubbed it until his scalp and face were as pink as a baby's. Every morning he donned a fresh white shirt and collar and placed a clean linen handkerchief in his pocket. It would seem that Sunday could make no difference; and yet it did, for upon the first day of the week his everyday perfection was multiplied as by seven.

"You are feeling remarkably well after your hard day in New York, Henry." Mrs. Wintringham looked her husband over critically.

"Yes," he replied, "I am. But why did not Molly wear the new hat? Now that I come to think of it—she had on the sailor."

"It—is a little too handsome for church, I think." Mrs. Wintringham rose as she spoke.

She was anxious to avoid discussion of the new hat, and was glad that Ellen's voice, as she crooned over her primer, reached them from the kitchen.

"Poor old thing! She is at her alphabet again. Strange, isn't it, that in all these months she hasn't made the slightest progress? One would almost imagine her a German from the way in which she pronounces the letters, only no German could give quite that richness to the vowels. I'll just go out and cheer her up a bit." She passed into the kitchen.

"What is that letter, Ellen?"

"Ah," said Ellen.

"What does that spell?"

"Tsay, ah, tay, cat," answered the old woman, proudly. "Aye, an' I'm doin' foine. I'll be able ter tell 'em all afore the year's done, that I will." As she spoke she caught sight of Ludwig, clad in his Sunday best, approaching the house.

"Bad 'cess ter 'im, and 'im with white eye-lashers an' atin' fourteen pertaties the day an' sayin' he's starvin'!"

"Fourteen potatoes?"

"Yes'm, that 'e does, mam, God savin' yer face; an' yesterday it wuz siventeen, an' if yez don't belave me, see for yersel' ter-morrer mornin'. I'm fair kilt wid th' peelin' av 'em. Ter-morrer he gets 'em wid th' jackets on."

Mrs. Wintringham smiled. If it were anything but potatoes, she could not have afforded to smile, but po-

tatoes cost them nothing. There was an abundance of potatoes. In her heart she was grateful for an abundance of something.

She passed on upstairs to Molly's room, as Ludwig entered the kitchen and knocked at the dining-room door. He was seeking the general, ostensibly for a word as to the morrow's work, but in reality to while away a pleasant hour before church.

Disconcerting as was his employer's conversation during the week, when the day's duties were in progress,—since the old man delighted in suggesting new and original methods of crop culture,—Ludwig courted it at other times. And he was always successful in evoking it, for invariably would the old man finish the business in hand by some leading question, such as, "Well, Ludwig, what do you think of so-and-so for town clerk?" or "I was reading an article to-day on such-and-such a subject," which might vary from spavin to his latest philosophical theory. Whereat Ludwig would sink comfortably into a chair or upon the lower step of the porch, and raising his lacklustre green eyes, drink it all in uncomprehendingly. Many a long hour had he passed thus, transported with satisfaction, so it would seem, though unable to answer Ellen's queries at mealtime, as to the subject of the discourse, further than to say, "Him bane great man"; to which Ellen would make answer, "Aye, that he is, and as handsome as a picter, God bless his sowl!"

When Molly left the house, she walked quickly up the road toward the church at the top of the long hill. There was a new softness to the air, a deeper gold to the sunshine. It was as though her heart were singing, and her whole body seemed extraordinarily light. She thought of Abraham and his eight sons, and of

Jack Gordon, and of her baby, whom she would see before many hours should have elapsed. She planned a new dress for him, and the next lesson that she would give Jack. At the bridge she paused and rested her elbows on the pole that, stretched between two boulders, served as a railing,—it was where she had laid the baby three days before,—and looked down into the cool water as it bubbled over the gold-colored rocks. Tiny fish darted here and there; a great green frog blinked up at her and then dived beneath the bridge, out of sight.

As she stood there, listening to the tinkling of the water, breathing deeply of the warm fragrant air, and watching in fascinated silence the broken reflection of the clouds in the stream, footsteps sounded behind her. She turned abruptly and faced Jack Gordon. His hair was smoothly brushed, his hands were clean, his nails trimmed, his neck encircled by a collar. There was an indefinably different atmosphere about him, which she felt instantly.

"Why, Jack," she said, laying her hand in his. "Where did you come from? I didn't see you."

"I was behind you," he replied. "I'm glad you stopped, for I wanted to let you know that I've been thinkin' over all you told me yesterday."

Molly left her contemplation of the brook, and they started slowly along the grassy path. At first Jack was silent, and then he said, as though it were a little speech that he had carefully thought out and prepared to say to her:

"If ever I amount to anything, Miss Molly, it will be owing to you, and I want you to know it." He looked shyly down into the animated face beside him. "Somehow I can't believe it. There was I, out in the fields,

thinking hard thoughts against the world and wondering how it came so, and blaming God, and there was you——”

“‘Were you,’” suggested Molly, softly.

“‘Were,’—thank you,” said Jack; “there were you sitting under the big tree, all sorry and hurt because you wanted to help some one, only you’d gone to the wrong one, and then somehow I had the strangest longing to go over and talk to you. I can’t jest explain it.”

“‘Just,’” corrected Molly.

“‘Just,’” said Jack. “You won’t have to tell me very long, Miss Molly. I put down all them words you gave me yesterday——”

“‘Those words.’”

“‘Those words,’ and I don’t intend to be caught many times. But as I said, I had the strangest feeling that I wanted to talk to you, you looked so little and pretty in your pink sunbonnet.”

Molly’s dimples promptly acknowledged the compliment.

“So I just went, not clearly knowing why, and then—— Oh, Miss Molly, I can’t rightly go on. I wonder if that’s the way the birds feel when they fly south before the cold begins, and the pigeons when they start for home. They can’t know the points of the compass—they just feel to go—and it’s the hand of God.”

Jack stopped speaking, his eyes gazing over the treetops, where a flock of birds wheeled and eddied far up above them in the intense blue, and Molly looked at him, her face filled with awe.

“I never had such thoughts, Jack,” she said at length, breaking in upon his reverie. “Tell me some more.” She looked humbly up at him.

"There is nothing more to tell," he replied. "Those are just ideas I have sometimes. I don't know where they come from."

They walked along in silence for a space, and then Jack asked abruptly, "Miss Molly, what does *triumvirate* mean? I heard a man say it yesterday."

Molly regained her self-possession immediately. They were once again within her province. It was due to her grandfather's instructions, however, and not to her brief study of Latin that she was able to answer promptly:

"It means *three men*. It comes from two Latin words, *tres*, meaning 'three,' and *vir*, meaning 'man.' In Rome three men at one time ruled the people, and they called them the *triumvirate*."

"Then Socrates and—who were the other two? He said something about Socrates and some others being a *triumvirate*."

"Plato and Aristotle."

"Yes. Then they were rulers?"

"No," said Molly, "they were philosophers."

She grew maternal. "They use that word nowadays, Jack, in other ways," she explained, patiently. "Three powerful men associated in business or anything can be called a *triumvirate*."

Jack nodded comprehendingly, and then smiled down on her as though she were a very small child.

"How do you know so much?" he asked. "They don't teach that in school, do they?"

"Grandfather tells me," she answered. "He has always talked philosophy to me as long as I can remember. I like it. It is easy."

"What is philosophy?" Jack propounded the question quizzically, as though he scarcely expected her to

know. He had heard the word often, but it had always seemed to apply to something so far beyond his comprehension that he had never thought much about it.

"Love of wisdom," answered Molly promptly. "Any man who loves wisdom and searches for it is a philosopher,—that is, if he lives by what he learns."

Jack whistled. "That's one on me," he said. "I thought that philosophers were musty old men in colleges. Why, any one could be a philosopher at that rate."

"Yes," answered Molly, "that's what grandfather says. He says that philosophers understand underlying laws. That means, why things happen. They aren't satisfied to believe just the way they seem. If one hunts far enough back, one always finds that God makes everything happen. Philosophers don't always call it God, but they mean it just the same."

"Like me walking over to you when you sat under the big tree, and the birds going south, and the pigeons flying home," ventured Jack, his cheeks flushed with the excitement of entering a new realm of thought, and yet one in which he felt strangely at home.

Molly stopped short and looked up at him, and the awe returned to her face. "That must be it," she said, speaking very slowly.

"What?" Jack gazed wonderingly at the thin little face with its scarlet cheeks and great glowing black eyes.

"You are a philosopher."

"I?"

"Yes." Molly raised her finger to lend emphasis to her words, and spoke impressively. "You knew that it was God telling you to go over to the big tree where

I sat,—that He was the cause. I should never have thought of it, unless I had been told.” She resumed her place by his side and they walked on slowly. Her face wore a dejected expression.

“Some one has to tell me everything,” she went on, mournfully. “Ideas don’t come to me all of themselves. I don’t know any more, except about Socrates and Plato and Aristotle, and I won’t have time to tell you to-day because we are most there. But they were philosophers, and they taught the people, and Socrates was the first. The emperor made him poison himself by drinking hemlock and he died. He must have been jealous because Socrates knew so much. Good-bye, Jack.”

They had reached the church door.

“Good-bye, Miss Molly.” Jack put out his hand. He seemed to enjoy taking her exceedingly small one into his own. It was the hand that had stretched out to him in his isolation.

“Good-bye, Jack,” Molly repeated, looking up at him in not at all a superior manner. He appeared almost commanding at that moment. His expression was so earnest, so dignified, so eager after the truth,—to express it briefly, so philosophic. She found it difficult to remember that he was only Jack Gordon, who worked in the fields and cut people’s grass, whereas she was the general’s granddaughter.

“Jack, I wish that you would call me Molly,” she said.

The boy blushed, and smiled, and lost his likeness to a philosopher.

“Good-bye, Molly,” he said, hesitating a trifle,—while to himself he added what an older man might have spoken aloud,—“And may God bless you.”

CHAPTER V

"Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home."

MOLLY, clad in her rose-colored cashmere gown, sat in the largest rocker in the nursery of the orphanage, holding in her arms Harold Hastings. Her feet with difficulty reached the footstool. Harold was nearly asleep and she was crooning softly what her old black nurse, a southern-born negress, had sung to her when she was a baby.

The nursery was deserted save for the quaint-appearing little girl who occupied the center of the room, for the other babies, whose white cribs ranged about the wall, were still out for their airing. For nearly an hour Molly had wheeled Harold around the walks which ran attractively through the ample grounds surrounding the Home, and now she was engaged in the, to her most satisfactory, task—that of putting him to sleep.

"Isn't she a darling!" Unknown to Molly, two of the nurses had halted in the hall outside the door, and stood looking in at her. "She really believes that he belongs to her."

"He does," replied the other, "if love is a sign of ownership. She couldn't care more if she were its mother. It is almost uncanny."

"It is beautiful, I think," returned Miss Whitney, the nurse who had spoken first, the one with the deep

dimples and the pink cheeks admired by Molly. "If its own mother loves him half as well as she does—provided he has one—he is lucky. I almost hope that the woman who telegraphed from San Francisco this morning won't prove to be the right one."

"Why, Jane Whitney!"

"Yes, I know, Annie. Of course I don't really want the baby to grow up an orphan in a Home, even to please Molly Hastings, and yet I shall be sorry for her when the real mother turns up. That baby was certainly stolen."

"Of course he was, and it's the baby's mother that I'm sorry for. She must be frantic, poor woman! Molly will get over it, she is only a child."

They passed on.

Molly rose softly as the clock struck six and laid Harold in his own small crib. She drew the covers over him and, after kissing the top of his yellow head, stood looking down at him as his own mother had no doubt done many a time. Then she tiptoed from the room and downstairs to the hall below, where she met Miss Whitney.

"Have you had a nice afternoon, dear?" The nurse slipped her arm around the little girl's shoulders as she spoke.

"Oh, yes, indeed!" Molly answered, joyously. "It is a great responsibility to really own a baby, and even though I know that he receives the very best of care,"—she politely emphasized the "very,"—"still it is my duty to see him as often as possible. I read an article last evening in the *Mothers' Magazine* that Mrs. Dennis takes. She said she thought I ought to, since I owned a baby—she's Daisy's mother. Daisy is my best friend, and I'm going to bring her to see Harold

some day so you can see her—when I went over to borrow the pattern for his cap. I'm embroidering forget-me-nots on it. It said that a baby's milk ought to be sterilized. Do you sterilize Harold's milk, Miss Whitney, may I ask?"

The young nurse's dimples came and went rapidly during Molly's involved speech, and her cheeks grew several shades pinker.

"Yes, indeed we do, dear. Come with me to the laboratory. You are just in time to see the whole process, and then you can throw that responsibility off of your mind,—that is, if it won't make you late for your tea."

"No, it won't. We don't have tea Sunday nights. We have sandwiches on the sideboard, so it doesn't matter when I get home. I'd love to."

"I hope, Molly dear, that some day you will have a——" Miss Whitney bent over and kissed Molly's surprised face.

"A what?" queried Molly.

"A five-pound box of chocolates," finished the nurse, irrelevantly.

Molly laughed. "So do I, only I'd have to give most of them away. Chocolates make me sick."

"How would you like me to lend you this little book on the care and feeding of infants?"

Miss Whitney picked up a small green book from a table as they passed it.

"Oh, I should love it, even better than chocolates!"

When Molly left the orphanage half an hour later she had increased her store of knowledge considerably, as well as her sense of responsibility. In her hands she carried the little book of world-wide reputation

among mothers, although it is doubtful whether so young a one had ever before perused its pages. She walked slowly and held it close to her eyes, for she was endeavoring to find out, before the twilight deepened to such an extent as to render reading impossible, the proper treatment for croup.

"Good afternoon, Miss Molly."

The little girl started slightly and halted, for although the voice was familiar no one was in sight. After looking about her for several seconds, she espied Jack Gordon as he stood behind the tree that she had just passed.

"You frightened me," she said as he stepped out. "I wondered where you could be."

"I didn't get behind until you was most here," explained the boy apologetically. "I wanted to see if you'd notice. I come to meet you because I knowed you'd be leavin' about now. How did you find the baby?"

"He is very well," replied Molly, "and so darling! Wouldn't you like to go with me to see him some day, Jack?"

"You bet I would, Miss Molly."

"Why don't you say Molly? I like it better."

"All right, I will—Molly." Jack smiled shyly as he spoke her name.

"And do you mind if I tell you a few mistakes before I forget them?"

"No—Miss—that is, Molly. That's the only way you can learn me."

"Teach me," corrected his monitor.

"Teach me," said Jack.

"And," went on Molly, "you must say 'you were' instead of 'you was,' and 'knew,' not 'knowed.'"

"Thank you," replied the boy.

"Little Mama says that it takes patience and persistence to overcome a fault, but how can any one be patient and persistent if he doesn't know he is doing it?"

"He can't, that's a fact, can he?" admitted Jack. "Well, you will always tell me, won't you?"

"Yes, I will, Jack. I'm studying about babies now, for Harold belongs to me even if they do take care of him at the Home, and I am responsible for him and—why, I never thought of it before,—I am responsible for you too, Jack, in a way, for your education. I am really a little bit like a mother. Isn't that a lovely thought? It will make it all the more interesting."

A soft flush climbed Jack's cheeks and he strove to conceal the smile that hovered around his mouth, although it was a smile in which there was no hint of derision. As he looked down at Molly's shining face his own expressed the same tenderness as on the day when she had first presented her grandparents with Harold Hastings.

"You didn't wear your new hat to-day." Manlike he changed the subject to conceal his own emotion. "I expect it's pretty."

Molly's face fell and she closed the book. "If you'd like to have me, I'll bring it to our lesson and you can see it. It is perfectly beautiful!" She pronounced the words with growing solemnity.

"Don't you like it? You don't sound as if you did."

"Oh, yes, I love it. It is the prettiest I ever saw." She spoke as though she were reciting a text, and the boy looked at her curiously.

"I never thought a girl'd act that way over a beautiful hat. Doesn't it become you?"

Molly's preternatural gravity gave way. "If I tell you all about it," she inquired, eagerly, "will you promise never to tell?"

"I promise," replied Jack, earnestly, as on the day before.

Molly's expression became enthusiastic once more.

"I'd meant not to confide in any one but Daisy, but I will in you instead. It can be our second secret, can't it?"

"Yes." Jack's face grew expectant. It was a new and delightful experience, this of hearing a little girl's confidence. He had always wanted a sister.

"Perhaps some day I'll tell you about the secret cupboard, too. I might even show it to you. Only Little Mama knows about it."

"Secret cupboard! Have you got one?"

"Yes, but I haven't time to tell you to-day. Hal hunts all over at night to find it. We keep the sugar there. He eats it like candy. He even puts it on beef-steak. But the hat is the important thing to talk about now.

"Little Mama says that we must look at the whole matter as an interesting study in human nature, and that then we won't feel so badly about it. We can consider it either as an example of the ruling passion strong in death,—only grandfather isn't dead and I don't want him to be, because I love him next to Little Mama, and I'm not finding fault with him at all,—or that all men are children, as the 'Prince's Wooing' says. That's a book I've been reading. Grandfather did a childlike thing yesterday when he spent twenty dollars for a hat marked down from forty dollars.

The rest he spent on carfare and a luncheon. And it wasn't because he is selfish. It was all for me, you see. There would have been enough for all our winter underwear, and shoes and a dress and a good enough cheap hat with daisies around it, marked down to half price."

"You don't mean it!" ejaculated the boy, his eyes opening wide. "Twenty dollars for a hat. Phew!" he whistled. "It must be a beauty!"

"It is," said Molly. "It has four great high ostrich plumes on the side that turns up, and lots of watered ribbon, and a rhinestone buckle that you couldn't tell from diamonds, and two long streamers." As she ended tears overflowed her eyes.

"I wouldn't cry, Molly, if it is as grand as that. Why didn't you wear it to-day?"

"Oh, Jack, I look awful in it. It's too old for me and my freckles show dreadfully. It's too big, too. My face looks like a little wizened-up peanut. And I've got to wear it to the garden party so that grandfather won't feel hurt. He was ashamed when we all sat so still looking at it. I saw his lips quiver, so I had to kiss him and tell him how beautiful it was."

"That's hard luck," said Jack, "but it makes me all the prouder of bein' learnt by you. And I wish now more than ever that you was my sister."

"Oh, Jack, do you really?"

Even in the twilight Molly's face looked as though the sun had suddenly shone on it. She forgot to correct Jack's grammar.

"Sure I do. And I'll bet you look fine in it, better than you think. But how did he come to get it?"

"A saleslady he'd known thirty years ago when he was rich recognized him. She's head of a depart-

ment now. She told him he hadn't changed a mite except his hair, and that he was handsomer than ever, which Little Mama says is true, and that she had exactly the hat for his granddaughter, marked down to only half price, so he just naturally bought it exactly as he used to buy beautiful things for Little Mama when she was young. That is the ruling-passion part; the child part is in his letting her flatter him until she made him do what she wanted him to."

The boy turned his head away abruptly. Molly seemed very young to him at that moment, not at all like either a mother or a teacher.

"You are not laughing, are you, Jack?"

"No, indeed!" He faced her seriously, although he was again unable to keep his eyes from twinkling.

"It was a really distressing occurrence," went on Molly, using one of her grandfather's favorite expressions. "Twenty-five dollars is a good deal of money to waste. He didn't even get the blue worsted for Harold's carriage blanket that I was going to knit. And Hal said I'd look like a beauty on a cigarette card with that thing on my head, if I'd only hide my face. It was an awful moment."

"Couldn't you iron it out and trim it over? I saw my mother do that once."

Molly stopped short.

"Of course, I could! Jack, you are wonderful. You know more than I do in everything. I'm so glad I told you, and grandfather will be, too. Little Mama says that he isn't happy over it at all to-day, though he tries to pretend."

"I don't suppose I'll see you until Friday." They had halted for a moment at the gate of Locust Cottage. Jack spoke wistfully. "But I'll study hard

every night on all them lessons that you give me and I'll soon be caught up to where you are, and then it will be easy."

"'Those lessons'—and 'gave me,'" corrected Molly softly.

"'Those lessons that you gave me,'" repeated Jack. "To-morrow I have to go to the Beeches and help Mrs. Heaton's man about the garden."

"Oh, that reminds me," Molly's face glowed. "I forgot to tell you something lovely. Seeing Harold put it all out of my mind. Mrs. Heaton telephoned grandmother to invite me to take dinner with her some night this week. She hasn't met me, but she has seen me, of course. She will call herself in that lovely brougham with the coachman and footman, and send me home in it, too."

A shadow passed over Jack Gordon's face as he turned away from the gate, a shadow that reached his heart as well. Nothing could have so well illustrated the difference between their stations in life. It was his place to grub in the garden, it was hers to sit at table.

Something akin to rage filled his boy heart, rage against the established order that engulfed him. Why, why did it have to be so? What right had one to be reared among books and pictures and gentle manners, while another—— But it was of no use to think such thoughts, and the boy knew that it was of no use. He looked up into the sunset sky, and listened to the sleepy chirp from a small nest in the tree overhead, and being, as Molly had found out, a bit of a philosopher, his face cleared and he began to whistle.

CHAPTER VI

AS THE winter months slowly advanced, friendly, even familiar relations became established between the owner of the Beeches and the occupants of Locust Cottage. The Wintringhams learned that Mrs. Heaton was a widow of less than a year's standing, and that she had come to Hambletown because her husband had planned the great castlelike structure of gray stone, which she made her home, and had lived to see it well under way. She felt nearer to him in it than anywhere else. It was also in conformity with his wish, as well as for Gertrude's sake, that she had not cast aside bright colors and donned the somber garb of mourning. And she in turn became acquainted with the details of the financial disaster which had swept from the general his inherited money, leaving barely enough capital to yield the slender income upon which he and his family lived.

The coming of Mrs. Heaton to Hambletown had proved an epoch-making event in their lives. Before her sudden appearance upon their very threshold, straight from out that world upon which they had forever turned their backs, General Wintringham and his wife had imagined themselves content with what the town had to offer.

The general held daily conclave with the various farmers that halted on their way to and from town for a word relative to crops or the weather, or to drink

in learned opinions concerning insect pests or approaching elections, the old gentleman's mind being an encyclopedia of theory upon these subjects. He had, as well, new and progressive ideas upon the raising of crops, which he endeavored to put to the test through his hired man, Ludwig, a young Swede with exceedingly white eyebrows and eyelashes and a general ramshackleness of bearing not out of keeping with his mental development. To General Wintringham also trooped the boys and girls with their essays, to be drilled for the commencement exercises. And Mrs. Wintringham enjoyed no less popularity among the farmers' wives, who brought their troubles to the back door of Locust Cottage and usually left them there.

It was all sweet and pastoral and, so they had persuaded themselves, satisfying; but with Mrs. Heaton's unlooked-for advent, forgotten instincts awoke and kind clamored for kind. It became a regularly established custom for Molly and Hal to dine at the Beeches at least once a week, although, after the first trial, never together, Hal's aloofness in Molly's society being very evident, as well as her loss of spontaneity beneath her brother's watchful eye.

It was proving a very happy winter to Molly, due no doubt to the fact that every moment of her time was filled. Jack Gordon called for his lesson punctually each Friday evening at a quarter before seven, when he and his teacher would retire to the general's den, a small book-lined room adjoining the library. It was here that the old man was wont to invoke the philosophic muse. Above the bookcases hung etchings of foreign interiors, and a head of Dante done in bronze looked down from the top of the secretary, all as familiar to Molly as her alphabet. Before long

she had shared her knowledge with her pupil, and it came about naturally that this sharing extended beyond the boundaries of the den to the walls of the library and parlor; at that stage the general himself assumed the helm of Jack's craft and piloted it through the shoals and quicksands of art and architecture and medieval history, into the quiet waters of his own favorite philosophical sea. As a matter of course, the boy could not at once retain and assimilate this varied knowledge, but in time the new ideas began to assume some sort of order and to form a fitting mental background for the concrete daily lessons.

It was not long before the townsfolk as well as the school authorities knew of Jack Gordon's struggle for an education, and of Molly's assistance, and the keenest sympathy was excited. Scarcely a fortnight after the lessons had begun, Mr. Raeburn, the principal, in company with Miss Mitchell, Molly's best-loved teacher, had called upon the general and Mrs. Wintringham, and after ascertaining the seriousness of the undertaking, had suggested that Miss Mitchell should devote one evening a week to preparing the boy definitely for examination in all grammar-school subjects, with a view to enrolling him in the high school as a special student, which arrangement would leave to Molly merely the task of keeping him abreast of the advance work. And thus it was arranged.

Nor did the baby suffer any loss as Molly became more and more engrossed in Jack Gordon's progress. As Mrs. Wintringham had often maintained, her vitality seemed inexhaustible, and every task became in her hands a joy. Regularly upon the days when visitors were allowed at the Home she appeared at the appointed hour to take Harold Hastings for his air-

ing, after which, if the nurse permitted it, she would undress him, bathe him, and rock him to sleep. Before many weeks had elapsed she had learned all the essentials of baby culture, and had very nearly memorized the little green book.

When the snow came and it became difficult to push the carriage, Jack Gordon nailed a soap box to Molly's sled and painted them both white, and this took the place of the perambulator. At first the townspeople were inclined to smile at the pair, the little girl in the red knitted cap and gray coat, and the solemn blue-eyed baby; but as the months went on and her devotion did not diminish, the sight lost its novelty and seemed no more strange than that of any other child hauling her little brother. Molly's exuberant delight in her charge helped many another child make play of what had been until then a wearisome burden.

To Molly neither Jack Gordon nor Harold Hastings ever became quite ordinary, quite accepted as a matter of course. She was always conscious of the happiness that they gave her, always a little touched with wonder and thankfulness. They had filled such a want and had come so unexpectedly. She could not but be glad that the woman who had journeyed from California to Hambletown had not proved to be Harold's mother,—glad in spite of the fact that she had been made sad by it as well, for she had happened to be at the Home when Mrs. Bachelder arrived. The woman had rushed frantically at Molly as she sat in the nursery rocking Harold to sleep, and had snatched him from her arms, only to give such a moan of grief as had haunted the girl for days afterward. Molly felt that she was wicked to be glad in the face of this poor woman's suffering, and yet when the baby cried and

stretched out his arms to her, she experienced such a sense of joyous relief that her own sobs had mingled with Harold's wails, and Miss Whitney had dropped to her knees beside the rocker only to be informed that she was crying because she was happy. But the disconsolate mother was fortunate enough to find her child, and considerate enough to telegraph the news to the Hambletown orphanage. After that Molly felt free to enjoy Harold without reservation.

Meanwhile a very noticeable change was taking place in Jack Gordon. The expression of patient, even fatalistic endurance of ills which he could not mitigate, had given place to one of hope. His evenings with his new friends and amid an environment propitious to himself, had supplied to him just the impetus that he had needed, an impetus which was denied him in his own home, where his mother, ill-tempered and jealous of whatever emphasized the natural difference in fiber between herself and her son, strove in every way to hold him down to her own level, but without success.

The small notebook in which he was in the habit of jotting down his grammatical errors, he carried always in his pocket and consulted frequently while on his way to and from his day's work. It was shortly after Christmas that there came to him a new opportunity for advancement, one which made him feel as though he were living on some enchanted isle. Mr. Sawyer, one of the town's well-to-do citizens and owner of the principal store, offered him a responsible position at a good salary, so good a salary for a beginner that he was put under strict promise to keep the amount to himself. And to facilitate this Mr. Sawyer suggested that he should withhold a certain

portion of it and deposit it in the bank for him against the future, to which the boy agreed.

Saturday was the day upon which Molly made her weekly visits to the Beeches. Of late she had been going in the morning and remaining all day, since she had begun music lessons with Mlle. René, Gertrude's governess. She was very fond of her music, and did her practicing before school on the worn grand piano that the Wintringhams had brought with them from New York. She had only one regret, which was that Hal refused to allow her to pass on to him the instruction which she had received from Mlle. René, and that in spite of the fact that he was one of the leading choirboys at Christ Church. In response to her offer he had said, "Aw, shucks!" and had walked loftily from her presence.

It was on one of these Saturday mornings in early spring, when Molly was trudging up the hill that led to the Beeches, that she saw advancing toward her a strange young man, wearing a cap, and in knickerbockers and leather leggings. While not handsome in the accepted sense of the word, as Jack Gordon, for instance, was handsome (whom her grandfather had once likened to the statue of Hercules), he had about him an air of breeding noticeably different from that of the Hambletown youths. Quite frankly Molly looked him over. At first he did not see her, or rather he paid no attention to her, as his eyes were following the flight of a flock of crows. It was not until they were about to pass each other that he looked down, and their eyes met.

"By Jove!" The young man halted, as did Molly in sheer surprise at his salutation, which was followed immediately by, "I beg your pardon."

"Oh, that is all right," she returned politely. "Grandfather says that 'by Jove' isn't swearing and isn't very bad slang either, because it is classic. The Bible says, 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain,' but Jupiter wasn't really God."

"Thank you, Molly." The young man spoke gently, but his eyes twinkled as she had often seen Jack's eyes twinkle. "May I walk with you?"

"Yes," she replied, somewhat hesitatingly, for she had been taught that she must never walk or talk with strange men. And yet she felt that this charming person could scarcely be classed in that category, especially when he knew her name. Nor did he look strange.

"Of course, you are Molly," he continued; "you could not be any one else. How is Harold Hastings?"

He spoke teasingly, as though he knew that her curiosity was alive as to his identity.

"He is very well, thank you," she replied. "He has learned to say 'mother,' only he says 'mudder.'"

"That is a splendid achievement. I hope that I shall see him some day. And how is Jack Gordon progressing?"

"Wonderfully," replied Molly, forgetting her curiosity. "He has a very brilliant mind. Mr. Raeburn told grandfather so, though, of course, we knew it before. He has passed his examinations in the grammar-grade subjects, every one. And he does as well with one lesson a week as I do with six lessons a week."

"That may be due to his teaching."

"Oh,—no—Mr.——" Molly floundered.

"Don't you remember me?" The stranger laughed. "Look me straight in the face. Now——"

He stopped walking, and they stood regarding each other solemnly. A puzzled frown gathered between the little girl's eyes.

"It seems as though I do remember you," she admitted. "Your face is not new at all."

"Perhaps my name will come to you before you reach your destination. That will be more fun than having me tell you, won't it?"

"Yes—" replied Molly, but her voice was not decided.

"Meanwhile," resumed the young man, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes, of you. I want you to help me paint a picture."

Molly stopped short again.

"Me! Oh, I'd love to, only I don't know much about painting. I never painted anything but book-marks and paper dolls and photographs."

"I don't want you to do the painting," explained the young man, "I want you to let me paint a picture of you."

"Of me? Why, I'm homely, and my face is thin, and I have freckles, and——"

"You are just what I want, freckles and all," laughed her companion. "Will you?"

"Yes—" replied Molly, and then a light broke over her face. "I know who you are!" she exclaimed. "You are Mr. Hamilton. I've seen your picture ever so many times. And I'm so glad that you didn't tell me, for it was lots more fun to find out by myself."

It was late in the afternoon. The general and his wife were sitting in the library before a light wood

fire, he with an open manuscript lying across his knees. He had just stopped reading and now removed his glasses from the end of his nose.

"What a fancy Mrs. Heaton seems to have taken to our little country Molly, with her impulsive ways and lack of ceremony!" said Mrs. Wintringham. Her tone expressed gratification. "I am so glad to have the child associate with one of our kind."

"Blood will tell." The general nodded his head sagely. "And we must not forget that she thinks equally well of Hal. By the way, where is he?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"Oh, he'll come out all right," predicted her husband, comfortably. "In spite of the fact that he associates chiefly with the hoodlums from Bedlam Alley, I have noticed that he holds himself superior to them. They seem to have constituted themselves a company of which he is the chief. A boy who walks as he does, and who can conduct himself as he evidently has conducted himself at the Beeches, need cause us no anxiety."

As the general spoke these words, his eyes widened, becoming riveted on the window, and he rose to his feet. His wife did likewise, and together they approached the front door. Before they could reach it, however, Molly burst into the hall.

"Grandfather! Little Mama! Mr. Hamilton is going to paint my picture! He drove me home, but he couldn't stop because he was on his way to the station and he had just time to catch his train. He says that I look like 'Youth Triumphant'—that's the name of the picture, and it might take a prize because he intends to enter it in a competition. I've had a lovely time. We cooked in Gertrude's little kitchen, and she

showed me how to make sponge cake. She knows even if she is only eight years old."

The general answered nothing, for he had not yet recovered from the astonishing sight of his granddaughter's approaching the cottage perched high on the box of a modish turnout beside a distinguished-looking young man, and attended by a coachman in full livery, who towered statuelike behind the animated pair on the front seat.

Mrs. Wintringham, however, as usual, was entirely equal to the occasion. Had Molly returned to Locust Cottage on the back of a camel with Arabs in attendance, her grandmother would have accepted it as a matter of course.

"That will be delightful," she said gently. "I am glad that you have had such a happy day. Now, begin at the beginning and tell us all about it."

The general resumed his place by the fire, and Mrs. Wintringham moved toward her own chair.

"Mr. Hamilton said, 'By Jove,' as soon as he saw me. He said that I was 'Youth Triumphant' come to life and seeking him out in his hiding. He didn't say it to me, but to Mrs. Heaton. He is her artist brother, who was been in Paris all winter. He didn't tell her he was coming because he wanted to surprise her. He will be back again next Thursday."

"How very nice," said Mrs. Wintringham. "How happy she must have been. When did he arrive?"

"Last night. He won't live with Mrs. Heaton, even though she has a beautiful studio for him. He'd rather starve in an attic for the sake of being independent. I don't really think that he is starving in an attic, though, because Mrs. Heaton laughed when she said it, and he looks healthy. He is awfully tall, as

tall as Jack, and he had on a lovely suit when he went away."

"She merely meant, dear," explained Mrs. Wintringham, "that he prefers independence. Mrs. Heaton told us all about him the other day. He has earned his own art education."

"A very proper spirit," interpolated the general. "He will succeed. Mark my words."

"But I don't see, Little Mama, why he isn't rich, too. Mrs. Heaton is his own sister. It would be funny if I were rich and Hal weren't."

"Mrs. Heaton was a poor girl before she married Mr. Heaton. Her father was a clergyman." As she spoke Mrs. Wintringham removed Molly's hat. "Tell us more about the picture. Mr. Hamilton knows, of course, that you are in school and that your studies must not be interfered with?"

"Oh, yes, Little Mama. That was the first thing that Mrs. Heaton spoke of. She said that he couldn't make any plans until she had seen you and asked your consent. I'm going up next Saturday morning to spend all day, and he is going to call for me with that lovely spider phaëton. May I?"

"It seems pretty well decided, dearie."

Mrs. Wintringham smiled and Molly flushed.

"Oh, not really decided, Little Mama darling! It won't be at all unless you and grandfather are perfectly willing, only I just knew that you would be pleased, and so I said I'd be there. Mrs. Heaton is going to call on Monday to ask you if I may. Oh, I am so happy! So many wonderful things have happened lately. Harold can talk and walk, if I hold both his hands, and Jack passed in all the grammar-school subjects and has a good position, and we know Mrs.

Heaton and Gertrude and have lovely rides in their motor, and now I'm going to be a regular model. Miss Mitchell said that Jack's examination papers were exceptionally good. I met her on the way to the Beeches before I met Mr. Hamilton. Wasn't she lovely to help me get him ready? All I've had to do was to keep him up with the advance work, and he knows it as well as I, even if he does only get it once a week."

"You had better take off your coat, dear," suggested Mrs. Wintringham, when the flow of Molly's eloquence had subsided. "No doubt we can arrange for the posing. I will talk it all over with Mrs. Heaton when she comes on Monday."

Meanwhile Walter Hamilton was nearing the station. His face had not lost its curious expression of mingled inspiration and amusement. He was seeing again the little eager girl advancing breathlessly along the country road, her back straight as an arrow, her head raised, her eyes wide and soft yet brilliant with excitement, and her cheeks of the purest carmine.

Yes, Molly was the very incarnation of youth.

The picture was to be of a young girl walking with triumphant tread and lifted eyes along the edge of a precipice, by pitfalls and venomous reptiles, serenely confident and unafraid, because she saw not that which threatened her, while in the distance sat Age, looking out furtively upon the dangers of the way.

CHAPTER VII

"SO YOU want to be a Stoic?"

"I try to be," said Molly, shifting her position by the fraction of an inch.

"Who fills your head with all this tr——" Walter Hamilton was about to say "trash," but changed it to "tremendous knowledge."

"Grandfather," answered the girl. "He says that he is laying the foundations of character, and that character is destiny."

"So that's it! Then he doesn't believe that we are born with any foundations."

"Oh, yes, he does, only they must be strengthened, and he says that the house won't grow on them of itself."

"Then you are not an Epicurean?"

"I am sometimes," admitted Molly, "but I try to be a Stoic. I guess that I'm about half and half."

"Does your grandfather want you to be a Stoic?"

"Yes. He wants Hal and me to do right for its own sake and never think of results. He says, 'Speak the truth, no matter what anybody says about you, and no matter what happens to you.' That is the way Jesus did."

This mixture of religion and philosophy and harmless childish prattle amused Molly's listener, who urged her on. What she expressed was the rigid theoretical piety of those who live entirely within the blissful

land of their own ideals. He wondered whether the general had ever met and grappled with temptation,—whether, were he so placed as to be forced to choose between doing right and losing his high repute, he would find it easy to speak the truth, no matter what any one said and no matter what happened to him, since doing right is so often conjoined with the world's applause that it cannot be taken as a gauge of character. And in so wondering Walter Hamilton meant no disrespect to the splendid old man, to whom he had grown sincerely attached during the past few weeks. If he had not as yet been put to the test, it was through no fault of his own.

"Now you may rest, little girl."

Molly leaped down from the platform upon which she had been standing, and came over to where Walter sat before the easel.

"Am I really like that, Mr. Hamilton?"

"You are to me," he replied, looking at her affectionately.

"But my freckles don't show there."

"I never see them, and so, of course, I can't paint them."

"But it is not only that," insisted Molly; "there is something wonderful about the whole picture that is not like me exactly."

"That is because I'm painting your soul, Molly. Do you know what that means? An artist always sees the very soul of what he paints, or else he is not an artist."

Molly's reply was so beyond her years that it startled the young man into silence.

"Perhaps an artist might be just painting his own soul into the picture. Little Mama says that some-

times the way the world looks to us is a reflection of our own selves."

Walter Hamilton rose and carried the canvas to one corner of the room.

"It is all but finished," he said. "You won't have to pose for the rest."

"I am glad for your sake," she replied, "but I am sorry for my own, because I have enjoyed it so much. Isn't it a good thing that we always have two weeks' vacation before Easter? You couldn't have finished it so soon if we hadn't. Just think, I have been up here nearly every day lately!"

"I have enjoyed it too, Molly, and the very best part of it has been knowing you. We shall always be friends now, won't we?"

"Yes," said Molly, seating herself in a deep arm-chair. "Always. And when you go back to Paris, I will write to you about everything."

"And I will answer every letter that you write," returned the young man. "That's a bargain." So saying, he shook hands gravely with her, and then took from his pocket a small flat box. Upon being opened it disclosed a bracelet of finely wrought silver, which he clasped around her wrist.

"This is for you," he said. "It will be a souvenir of your visits to my studio."

"For me? Oh, how darling! Thank you ever so much, Mr. Hamilton. It is perfectly lovely!"

Molly was so overcome that she could think of nothing further to say, until Walter added, "It came from Venice."

"Venice?" She drew a long breath. It was a magic word.

"Oh, how I should love to travel,—more than any-

thing else in the world! Perhaps I may some day, only we are very poor. But we don't mind that because we are gentlefolks, and Little Mama says that is what really counts."

Walter's face twitched.

"What are gentlefolks, Molly?" he asked.

"Oh, people who obey the Golden Rule, and are kind and polite to their inferiors, and never talk against a woman, and use good grammar. Isn't that what you mean by it?"

"About that," he replied, smoothing the amusement out of his face with his hand.

On their way from the studio to the ground floor they passed Gertrude's playroom, and here a surprise awaited Molly; for over in one corner, the corner devoted to housekeeping, stood Hal beside a doll's bed, over which Gertrude hung solicitously. When he saw his sister, who had halted in the doorway, his face reddened and he dropped the doll's hand. Then an expression of desperate determination came into his face. Gertrude looked hurt, and he was aware of it. Turning his back on his observers, he lifted the cold, bisque hand again and said a little thickly but yet audibly:

"Her pulse is rather better. Keep on giving her the same medicine until the next time that I call."

"Hello, Hal!" said Molly.

"Hello!" her brother replied, in tones that strove to be natural.

But Walter put his arm around Molly's shoulders, and drew her away.

"That was an example of moral courage," he said, when they were out of earshot. "Hal is a bit of a Stoic, I imagine. He was ashamed to be seen play-

ing dolls, and yet he kept on for Gertrude's sake. I'd never mention it to him if I were you. Your grandfather's cornerstones seem to be solidly laid."

"Perhaps," returned Molly, "Hal's foundations were all there anyway, and the house too, for he never listens to grandfather and he doesn't know what a Stoic is."

Walter Hamilton drove Molly home as usual. On the way through the village they passed Jack Gordon.

"Hello, Jack!" Molly waved her hand.

The boy had not happened before to be away from Mr. Sawyer's store when Molly and Walter Hamilton were driving through the village street. He had never seen them together. Without answering the salutation, he raised his cap and passed on. He did not smile and his eyes grew hot. Again he felt the presence of unseen barriers. He experienced a strange unboy-like rage at the sight of her in the perfectly appointed carriage beside that well-dressed man of the world, who was not so very many years older than himself. And she looked so unconscious, and at home, and in her own sphere. His little Molly!

Then the unreasoning anger passed, and his shoulders drooped. As a matter of course she was at home in the Heaton's carriage; nevertheless, he felt both dislike and distrust toward the young man in the driver's seat.

As the carriage drew near Locust Cottage, old Ellen came out on the back porch to address Ludwig, who had stopped for a friendly word. His stiff straw-colored hair stood bristlingly erect in a sparse pompadour, and his florid thin face was shiny from a recent application of soap and water, as he had but just returned from his day's labor in the field. His neck

was craned forward in its usual abjectness, his shoulders were stooped, his knees uncertain.

"There comes Molly and her beau," said Ellen. "Aye, an' it's a grand picter she's havin' painted of herself, th' darlint."

"Aye can paynt paycters, too," replied Ludwig.

"Oh, g'long wid yez." Ellen sniffed contemptuously. "A foine lot ye can."

She returned to the perusal of the primer which she held in her hand.

"An' him can paint," she chuckled, as she took her seat by the kitchen window. "Oh, lawsy me, drat him for a pore fool, an' him with white eyelashers, an' 'atin twinty pertaties th' day!"

Ellen put down her primer and laughed shrilly, as she watched Ludwig lead Mr. Hamilton's horses to the barn. In a few moments he returned, however, carrying a square of canvas. She saw him coming and took up her position in the doorway, her arms akimbo.

"Phat's that ye got?" she inquired. Her brown, wrinkled, good-natured face was alive with curiosity.

Ludwig made no reply, but ascended into the kitchen. Once there he carefully turned the canvas around, still keeping his eyes meekly lowered.

"An' glory be!" Ellen exclaimed, curiosity giving place to reverence, "but it's illigent! An' ye don't mane to tell me as how ye painted it yersel'?"

"Aye don' et," answered Ludwig. "Aye bane artist, like Mister Hameelton."

"An' be the saints above!" Ellen's admiration was apparent in her voice. "An' see the fish a gilligawkin' on the ind av th' line!"

In a bright red boat, which disported itself upon grass green waves, sat a wooden-faced fisherman,

dangling a huge fish from the end of a pole. There was not the first suggestion of shadow anywhere.

"Lave it be," said Ellen, "an' I'll show it ter th' ginerel himsel'."

When Molly came into the kitchen a few moments later to tell Ellen that Mr. Hamilton would remain for tea, she found the ancient maid-of-all-work still in silent contemplation of Ludwig's masterpiece.

"Him done it all hissel'," the old woman answered, with the pride of a near relative, as Molly took the work of art into her hand to examine.

"I'll show it to grandfather and Little Mama, and Mr. Hamilton," she said.

The little girl's face was filled with mischief as she turned her back on Ellen, who kept muttering to herself, "Who'd a thought it, an' him with white eyelashers, an' 'atin twinty pertaties th' day! Aye, but I'll skin 'em fer him th' night, that I will."

But to Molly's surprise none of her audience laughed as she displayed Ludwig's picture and made her explanation.

"Ludwig painted it!" exclaimed her grandfather. "So that is why he sits up so late at night. There is an element of pathos in a thing like that," he said, turning to Walter. "Wherever we look we encounter this constant striving toward the attainment of an ideal. It crops out in unexpected places and is none the less pathetic that it is, as in this instance, grotesque."

"But I think that it is funny, too, Grandfather," said Molly.

"It is too wretched to be funny," returned her grandmother, taking the canvas into her hand.

"And yet," said Walter, "as wretched as it is, it is not without a touch of merit."

"You don't mean that it is good!" Molly exclaimed, dismayed.

"No, it is not even a little good, but the fault lies in the man's mind rather than in the drawing. He doesn't see shadows, for instance, and he has no knowledge of perspective or of atmosphere. He could be taught. His artistic perception is about where that of the aborigines was; nevertheless, he can portray what he does see. The work is not clumsy."

"The remarkable thing is," said the general, giving the canvas back to Molly, "that he should have the inspiration to paint at all,—to create in his own sordid experience what to him stands for beauty. I must incorporate some discussion of art in my talks with him in the future."

How could General Wintringham know that, in Ludwig's own mind, he figured as a prince in disguise, a genius of the first rank, bound down to humble toil by cruel circumstance, the equal of any lord in the land, whose true worth would soon push him to the front in this country of the free? To him America meant equality. Here rulers emerged from log cabins. His present employment he regarded but as an episode.

He was in the kitchen when Molly gave back the picture with a word of commendation, and as he turned away, there stretched across his face the bland, superior, self-satisfied smile of a man who knows his own worth, and has, at length, achieved recognition.

The general, however, promptly forgot his man-of-all-work and his aspirations. When Molly returned to the library, she found him deep in discourse upon the relative merits of Corot and Millais, and Grinling Gibbons, and antique silver, with a dip now and then

into Greek sculpture. He was entirely in his element,—a grandfather to be proud of. His white hair glistened about his head like a nimbus, and his large blue eyes were brilliant with the pleasure of talking with an intellectual equal.

As soon as it was possible to excuse herself, Mrs. Wintringham did so and together with Molly repaired to the dining-room. This was the first time that Mr. Hamilton had been invited to dine with them.

"The yellow china, Little Mama?" Molly whispered.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Wintringham.

With one accord they entered a small room adjoining, in one corner of which stood a tall, white cupboard. It was a sort of holy of holies, the shrine where reposed the precious old china, heirloom of a hundred years or more. In the deep lower drawer of a linen closet, which stood near it, lay the splendid tablecloths, whose deep yellow ground matched the broad band that edged the fragile white ware, so fine and transparent that it might easily break between one's fingers like an eggshell.

"All these will be yours some day, Molly." Mrs. Wintringham spoke lingeringly. "These, and the chest of silver. They must be kept together. They are always handed down to the oldest daughter. You will care for them, won't you, dear, and not use them commonly? They can never be replaced."

"Yes, Little Mama," replied Molly, "but I can't bear to have you talk about it."

Mrs. Wintringham busied herself in silence about the unwrapping of the cloth, but her thoughts turned unconsciously to the young man in the library who, in spite of his calling, looked so spruce and energetic and up-to-date, and who had taken so sudden and unac-

countable an interest in her granddaughter. Not, of course, that——. Molly was far too young as yet. However, she selected the finest of the cloths and the choicest of the yellow napkins.

Before six Hal came stealthily in by the back door.

"Gee, Ellen!" he exclaimed, as he saw her beating up eggs for omelette and turning toast, "what's up?"

"Comp'ny, ye bad bye, ye. That's what's up. Ye'd better mind yersel', an' glory be, look at yer sthockin's! Ye'll have to change 'em. Ye've ben playin' marbles in Bedlam Alley wid the hoodlums agin, an' it's a good mine I hev ter tell yer grandfeyther. Rin up the back sthairs now, like a good chile, and change 'em afore he sees 'em."

"Who's the comp'ny?" whispered Hal, from the stairway, flecking away the telltale patches of mud from his knees.

"It's th' foine young man who lives where the little girl does as who yer courtin'," answered Ellen, with grand disregard of the family injunction that she be not mentioned. "Ye needn't think ye've it all to yersel'. He beaues Miss Molly home with a foine pair o' horses an' a carriage too, same as he always does."

This occurred on Saturday. On the following Saturday Walter Hamilton left Hambletown for New York, carrying with him "Youth Triumphant," which he duly entered in the competition for the five-thousand-dollar prize to be given to an American artist for the best study in idealism.

CHAPTER VIII

SUMMER came again, and fall, and with it Jack Gordon's promotion into the sophomore class. He found his evenings amply sufficient for his school work, especially as he had spent such spare time as was at his disposal during the summer in a course of reading with Molly, under the supervision of General Wintringham. He had become acquainted with many of the classics upon which Molly had been reared, not omitting "Arabian Nights," and had drunk deeply of the general's philosophic lore, to his own improvement and the old gentleman's delight.

It was during the middle of the winter that there occurred the only event that broke the chain of uneventful days,—rather a series of events, for misfortunes do not come singly, however trite that observation may be.

The first of these was the general's accident, not serious, but one which might have proved so had it not been for what he considered the intervention of Providence. It had followed hard upon the heels of good fortune in the shape of an unexpected gift of money from his niece, the first since the Wintringhams' change in fortune.

General Wintringham reclined in the armchair in his bedroom, one foot swathed in bandages resting upon a footstool.

"My dear, we have much to be thankful for."

"We have, indeed," replied his wife, dropping the paper and looking at the old man with eyes which overflowed with tenderness. "To think that you should have lain here in pain, while I, all unconscious of your condition, spent a gala morning at the Art Exhibit and lunched at Sherry's! How I wish that you might have been with us, Henry! Sherry's is really finer than was Delmonico's in its palmiest days, though I imagine that it must be a trifle more expensive."

"Even in that," returned her husband, "we may trace the Divine Hand. Had you not remained overnight with your friend in New York, and had you been in the carriage, you with your fragile frame, I shudder to think of the consequences. Even Hal was mercifully permitted to escape, in order that he might carry the message to the men at the station. It was remarkable that I should have asked him to get out and lead the horse just one instant before the carriage overturned in the ditch by the roadside."

Here a cautious tread sounded on the stairs, and a tinkling of glass and china.

"Molly is in her glory," said Mrs. Wintringham, smiling and lowering her voice as she cast a welcome glance toward the doorway. "I believe that she would enjoy having some one of us ill perpetually, if she might only have the happiness of playing nurse."

The subject of her remark appeared in a moment, wearing a white lace-trimmed apron over her blue sailor suit, and a maid's cap, improvised from a handkerchief enlivened by a bow of scarlet ribbon, resting on her black hair. She was carrying a lacquer tray. The general's evening meal was served on the pink china, last surviving bits of a tea set which dated back

even beyond the yellow china and which was quite as delicate. It was dedicated now to the decorating of invalids' trays.

"The rose is from Hal," said Molly, indicating the single bridesmaid rose nodding from a slender vase. "He bought it in the village this afternoon. He put it on as I came up."

"How thoughtful of him! But why did he not bring it himself?"

"I think he's shy, Grandfather. You see, he feels so terribly because he forgot the lantern when he went to the station for you that night. At first he thought he was a murderer, and that was worse than just plain being an orphan,—half-orphan, I mean,—no, grand-half-orphan,—not, of course, that being a grand-half-orphan wouldn't be greater suffering—that is——" Molly began to flounder. She did not wish to let her grandfather think that any pain could exceed that of losing him, yet there were moral considerations involved in being a murderer which were not to be ignored.

"We understand, darling," Mrs. Wintringham hastened to assure her.

"Give my love to him," said the general, "and tell him that I am always happy to see him."

"I will, Grandfather," replied Molly. "I must go now and eat my supper, for Jack is waiting for me in the den." So saying, the little girl darted out of the door, removing her apron and improvised cap on the way downstairs.

"And now, my dear," continued the old man, "I want you to go down and enjoy your own tea before it is cold."

Mrs. Wintringham, in spite of her protests, obeyed

his whim, but returned to her position by his side in an incredibly short time.

"I am afraid that you ate too hastily," remarked the old man.

His wife made no reply, but removed the tray, and picked up the paper again.

"It takes a crisis like this to make one aware of the real kindness lying at the heart of humanity," he continued, as his eyes wandered about the room, which was filled with flowers. Mrs. Heaton alone had sent a bouquet every day from her hothouse, besides various potted plants; and the rest of his friends, of whom, as he became more and more aware, he possessed a goodly number, had done their share in the way of geraniums and heliotrope, as well as in jellies, broths, and other tempting dishes.

"When is Dr. Dolliver coming?" he asked. "How true it is that the real physician feeds the soul, as well as the body! I am the better for his calls, even when he prescribes nothing. Emma's most unexpected gift makes the doctor's bill not a thing to be dreaded in the least."

"He may drop in this evening," Mrs. Wintringham replied. "As for Emma's gift, however, it is in a sense responsible for your accident. Without it we would not have gone to New York. Had you thought of that?"

The general's expression became intellectual at once.

"That method of reasoning, my dear," he said, "is fallacious in the extreme. It is a common error, as I have often pointed out, to confuse with causes events which are merely antecedent in time. Emma's gift had no causal relation to my accident, which was the

result solely of Hal's failure to bring the lantern. I have not spoken to him on the subject, deeming the lesson provided by my suffering to have been sufficient. It might have been a more serious accident than a twisted ankle. A carriage does not overturn usually with so slight damage."

"You are probably right, Henry," she replied, with wifely submission, "and yet, if it had not been for the gift——"

"I understand exactly how it appears to you," the general's voice grew stronger; "but I must insist, if I would be true to my principles, that it had nothing to do with my accident. One might as easily say that the fact of my having been born caused it, since had I not taken upon myself individual physical existence it could not have occurred."

He ceased speaking with a pardonable feeling of pride in an argument so unassailable.

"Still," Mrs. Wintringham ventured—but at that moment the door-bell rang, and in a moment they heard Ellen toiling up the stairs to announce a visitor.

Meanwhile in the den excitement ran high.

"I never liked poetry before." Jack spoke enthusiastically. "Now I see why. I didn't know what it was driving at. 'Like a swarm of golden bees!' By Jeminy! How did he ever think of that? That's simile, isn't it? The stars do look like golden bees, that's a fact."

One of the most noticeable improvements that had taken place in the boy was in his English, but for this the general no less than Molly was responsible. No one could pass as much time in his company as had Jack Gordon during the past year and a half, without absorbing somewhat of his manner and much of his

vocabulary, especially when a deliberate effort was made to do so.

"Hello," he exclaimed suddenly, "there is Mr. Raeburn. I recognize his voice. He has called to see how your grandfather is."

Molly parted the curtains that hung between the den and the library. "Perhaps Hal has been bad," she speculated. "I see him peeking around the dining-room door."

In a moment they heard the visitor ascend to the floor above, and they returned to their task. Some fifteen minutes later, however, they were brought suddenly back to the present by the strident tones of Ellen's voice.

"Hal! Hal!" she called, "the ginerall wants ye im-mejate."

"It *was* Hal," whispered Molly, "he must have been bad in school. But he is ever so brilliant. He stands at the head of his class without studying at all. Why, the other day I found him writing his composition on the rail of the bridge with the fountain pen Aunt Emma gave him for Christmas, to hand in when he reached school. I never stood at the head of the class, and I've tried lots of times. Little Mama says that he is a character."

Hal meanwhile tiptoed back to the kitchen, where he found Ellen awaiting him.

"Whist!" she said, sibilantly, "don't make ary a sound. Th' schule masther, he's been here, but divil a bit could I hear what 'twas about. He just wint. Here, take this afore ye go up." She seized from the table the salt-box, which she had in readiness, removing the lid of the stove at the same time. Without a word Hal secured a handful of salt, gravely tossed

it over his left shoulder into the fire, and mounted at once to his punishment.

The general was alone. In spite of his recent accident he felt sufficiently well to deal harshly with his grandson. The matter in hand required harshness. This was the second of the misfortunes. He had requested his wife to leave him, that he might not be tempted into leniency by her presence.

"Hal," he said.

"Yes, sir," replied his grandson, straightening his backbone and shooting a level glance at the old gentleman, who coughed and removed his glasses.

Below in the library Mrs. Wintringham shivered. What was about to happen? Had Hal tried beyond the limits of endurance the noble self-control which the general had always exhibited? She closed the door leading from the library into the hall.

"Hal," repeated General Wintringham, gazing sternly at the erring boy, "explain yourself."

"Mr. Raeburn told you," Hal spoke evasively.

"I wish you to promise me," continued his grandfather, sonorously, "that from now on until the end of your life you will never again indulge in the use of tobacco. Smoking is a noxious and filthy habit. Do you promise?"

"No, sir," returned Hal, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other and looking again into the general's eyes.

"You defy me?" The old man's voice grew stern. "You dare to defy me?"

Hal shifted again, hunching one shoulder, while the general gazed at him helplessly.

"Will you promise not to smoke again until you are twenty-one?" he inquired more gently.

"Yes, sir." Hal looked into his grandfather's eyes for a third time.

"Ahem!" General Wintringham's voice grew kind.

"That is a good boy," he said. "I feel assured that you can be trusted to keep your word. And now tell me how you came to take my pistol without asking my consent? Do you not know that such behavior is given a reprehensible name?"

"A what?" queried Hal.

"That it was stealing?" interpreted the general.

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you not ask me for it, my boy?"

"You wouldn't er let me have it."

The general coughed. Hal's reasoning was flawless.

"Did you not realize the danger of carrying a loaded pistol?"

"Yes, sir."

"You like to do dangerous things?"

"Yes, sir."

The old man's face beamed in spite of himself. Hal was not a coward, so much was evident.

"Did you ever fire it?"

"Yes, sir, and I hit the bull's eye as fur as twice across this room."

"You did? That was excellent, my child. Upon Fourth of July, when such demonstration is permissible, I will allow you to exhibit to me your skill. But I wish you to promise me now not again to carry firearms until such a time as I shall grant you permission. Do you so promise?"

"Yes, sir." Hal shifted again.

"Why did you not return directly from school?"

Silence.

"Where did you go?"

"To the village."

"What did you go for?"

Again silence.

"Hal, I insist upon being answered."

Still silence.

"Did you spend any money?"

"Yes, sir."

"The money which you so vulgarly obtained by hiring my pistol out to other boys?"

"Yes, sir."

"How much did you spend?"

"Two dollars an' fifty cents."

"What did you buy?" insisted the general. At last his fighting blood was up. For years he had not felt the concentrated resentment which took possession of him as he gazed at the stubborn little boy before him, who refused to answer.

"What, I repeat, did you buy?" he thundered. Mrs. Wintringham had never in her life heard her husband speak in such a tone. The reverberation of it reached every corner of the house. Hal was frightened. So possibly years ago had the general's enemies been frightened in time of battle.

"Have you your purchase about your person?" Again the general's voice boomed and overflowed the room. He was filled with a divine wrath, the justifiable wrath of a defied parent.

For answer Hal brought from the nethermost depths of his trousers' pocket a small box done up in green paper, and handed it to his grandfather. He did not look at him, but his face was white with suppressed emotion of some sort, and he kept biting his lips to prevent them from trembling. The wrappings, upon

being removed, disclosed a jeweler's box, in which upon a bed of white cotton lay a tiny gold chain. At its end hung an infinitesimal gold heart engraved with the initial "G."

The general's anger flickered out as suddenly as it had arisen. Taken in connection with certain past events made known to him by Mrs. Heaton, there could be no doubt but that the locket and chain were intended for Gertrude. He remembered, as he looked from it to the dejected figure of the little boy who refused to raise his eyes, that to-morrow was Gertrude's birthday. Molly had spoken of it at dinner.

"It's very pretty," he said, his voice once again controlled and exceedingly kind. "You have displayed excellent taste in its selection."

He held it out to his grandson, who, still without glancing up, received it and returned it to his pocket.

"That is all," said the general. "Strive to be a good boy in the future."

Hal turned to leave the room, but suddenly, as though unable to bear longer the humiliation of his exposure, he dropped his head upon his arm. Thus fate forever mocked him in all that was most sacred.

"I am sorry, Hal." His grandfather's voice was not at all steady. "If I had dreamed, if I had known—ahem——" The old man flourished his handkerchief about his nose. His heart was in reality very tender, and Hal's evident suffering affected him keenly. "I should not have insisted upon an answer. I consider," he went on in a stronger voice, "that your deportment has been most praiseworthy in all respects. Do you forgive me, my boy?"

He held out his right hand.

"Yes, sir," replied Hal.

CHAPTER IX

LITTLE MAMA," Molly burst into the library without returning the warm smiles of welcome with which she was greeted, "may I speak with you for a moment?"

Her serious, tear-stained face startled both of her grandparents, the more that she turned immediately and left the room. They exchanged uneasy glances, and Mrs. Wintringham, depositing the half-finished cup of tea upon the small table at her elbow, arose.

"Some misfortune must have befallen her," said the general.

"I have no idea what it can be," she replied, the anxiety in her face deepening. "I will go to her at once."

She followed her granddaughter upstairs to the low-ceiled room in the ell, where she found her seated on the foot of the bed, her books and hat thrown together upon the center of the white counterpane. Mrs. Wintringham made no comment, however, feeling that the moment was meant for other uses.

Molly did not smile at sight of her. "Little Mama," she said, "I cheated on my essay, but I didn't mean to. It was Emerson who wrote, 'To be great is to be misunderstood,' and that is the meaning of the whole thing. I copied it into my diary a year ago, and then I forgot about it. When I read it over, I thought that it would be a splendid topic to write on, and it was, only it was not my idea at all."

Here she began to cry again, as the enormity of her offense and its consequences overwhelmed her.

"And now I can't win the prize. I'll have to tell Miss Mitchell, and the judges, and—and—I've disgraced the family. I can't make you the lavender dress either, for I was going to buy it out of the ten dollars."

At this, her grief reached that stage where the human touch comforts, for she flung herself into her grandmother's arms and laid her head upon her shoulder.

Mrs. Wintringham moved toward the rocking-chair which stood in the corner of the room.

"Come over here, darling," she said, "and I will rock you."

Dearly Molly loved to be rocked. It had been a panacea for her every ill, until she had suddenly become too large for her grandmother to manage comfortably, but this was an occasion when Mrs. Wintringham felt comfort to be not the chief consideration. Molly dropped dejectedly into the haven of consolation thus offered, but her head came too high up for her grandmother's shoulder.

"Couldn't we use that?" she asked eagerly, indicating a small rush-bottomed chair which stood near, "and I lean over in your arms? That would bring my head just right, and you could rock."

"The very thing!" replied Mrs. Wintringham.

Neither of them saw anything humorous in the arrangement, as Molly placed the low chair beside her grandmother, sat in it, and then leaned over the diminutive lap and upon the dear shoulder, where she had sought and found comfort during all the years of her little girlhood.

Mrs. Wintringham began to sway gently back and forth.

"Yes," she said, "Emerson wrote it. I wonder how we came not to recognize it. It was just one of those strange coincidences, wasn't it? Perhaps it was because we are so used to hearing Grandfather discuss such subjects."

"And I have lots of thoughts just like it in my diary," amended Molly.

"It wasn't really cheating," continued her grandmother; "it is cheating only when done with the intent to deceive."

"Oh, I didn't mean to," said Molly, "and now Ray Collins will get the first prize."

"Who will receive the second one?" Mrs. Wintringham accepted the inevitability of the sacrifice without comment.

"I don't know; probably Genevieve Wells."

"I wouldn't cry any more, if I were you." She spoke soothingly. "It is hard, to be sure, but I am glad that my girl came right home and told me of her discovery, and did not attempt to carry on the deception."

"Why, of course not!" exclaimed Molly.

"Of course not," assented her grandmother. "But how did you come to recall it?"

Molly produced a thin blue envelope from the breast pocket of her sailor blouse, and handed it to her grandmother.

"Mr. Hamilton wrote it in his letter to me. He'll be home from Paris in only two weeks. I thought how lovely it would be for him to come to the rhetoricals,"—her voice was doleful,—“and I could have worn the

dress I embroidered. Then we would both have won a prize."

"Never mind, precious child." The little lady spoke briskly. "Some day you will realize how small a matter this really is. It means more to us to have you an honest, straightforward girl than to have you write any number of essays to take any number of prizes. Now wash your face and comb your hair, and come downstairs so bright and cheerful that no one will dream that anything unusual has happened."

Mrs. Wintringham smiled as she spoke, and Molly, making an endeavor to follow suit, answered, "I'll try, Little Mama."

Whereat her grandmother kissed her and departed.

Left alone, Molly stood in front of the glass and deliberately smiled. It was rather a stiff smile, but when it was accomplished the load on her chest lightened considerably.

Meanwhile Mrs. Wintringham had joined her husband in the library.

"The most unaccountable thing has happened," she began at once. "It seems that Molly copied a paragraph from Emerson into her diary a year or so ago and then forgot it. She used it unconsciously in her essay, not realizing the fact of its being borrowed until to-day, when Mr. Hamilton quoted it in his letter to her. It was not a paragraph that could be cut out." She still had Walter's letter in her hand. "She came right to me about it, however, and has given up all idea of winning the prize. She has behaved in an honorable, straightforward manner."

The general's face took on understanding.

"To be great is to be misunderstood," he quoted. "Of course it is from Emerson. I recognized it at

once, but I supposed that quotations were permissible. The rest is her own, is it not?"

"Yes, but quotations must be announced as such," replied his wife. "Besides, it is the germ thought of her essay."

"All that she would have to do would be to preface it by, 'Emerson says.' " The general spoke as one solving satisfactorily an unpleasant problem. "That would make it quite right. I am sure that Miss Mitchell and the judges would agree to the addition, once they understood the circumstances."

"Of course they would." The little old lady's voice rang out joyfully. "And yet," she added thoughtfully, "I am glad that it happened, for it has given us a chance to know the child's fiber. This was a real crisis, Henry, and she never flinched."

While she was speaking, however, the general's expression gradually changed into one of great thoughtfulness, and when she had finished he spoke:

"My dear,"—his voice was impressive,—"I am not sure that we would be doing our duty as the custodians of our child's future were we to suggest making the alteration in the essay of which I spoke a moment ago. This is one of the trials which develop character. It is, in a sense, Molly's first cross,—her first real suffering. Should we take away from her her opportunity for sacrificing herself to a principle, by making that sacrifice unnecessary? No, a thousand times, no. By showing her a way to juggle with the conditions which surround her, in order to gain her own ends, we should be guilty of grave offense. We should be weakening her ideals."

He ceased speaking, his voice shaken by emotion.

"You are right, Henry," his wife answered, after a

considerable pause. She sighed as she spoke. "I had not thought of it in that light. This bit of deliberate sacrifice may be a necessary preparation for the greater sacrifice which must inevitably come to her during the natural course of her life. Perhaps we can make it up to her in some other way, without, however, having it seem to bear directly on the situation. She must not be allowed to feel that sacrifice in one direction brings inevitable reward from another, except, of course, the joy which always results from well-doing."

"Blood will tell," remarked the general, with many nods of his head, after a considerable interval of silence. "May I ask you to give me another cup of tea, my dear? It has quite a different flavor when poured by your hands." This was a bit of gallantry which he seldom forgot, and which never lost its pleasing effect.

Mrs. Wintringham smiled and flushed faintly, and poured her husband a second cup of tea, which had been kept hot beneath a cozy.

"Would it not be well to ask Molly to come down?" he suggested, after another pause. "Now, while the matter is fresh in her mind, is the time to impress her with the question of morality involved in her decision. 'As the twig is bent,' my dear, 'so the tree is inclined.'"

Mrs. Wintringham touched a tiny silver bell which stood on one corner of the tray, and Ellen appeared forthwith.

"Ellen, will you please tell Miss Molly that her grandfather would like to speak to her," she said, with gentle dignity.

"Yis, marm, that I will," replied Ellen, calling instantly and before she had closed the library door:

"Molly, Molly, yer grandfeyther wants ye."

"How dreadful!" Mrs. Wintringham shivered. "I wish that I could teach Ellen not to call in that way, and yet," she added apologetically, "I really could not expect her to climb the stairs when she suffers so from rheumatism, especially as we have only one maid-of-all-work."

"It is not much like the days when we enjoyed the services of four servants, or five," remarked the general reminiscently, "but we must not complain. We have each other and the children, and sufficient to supply our daily wants. The probability of Emma's sending Hal to college with Rupert relieves my anxiety with regard to the children's future. Molly, I presume, will, in good time, marry."

"I trust so," returned his wife, "and I hope with all my heart that she will prove fortunate in her choice of a husband. She has grown most attractive during this last winter."

"I have observed it," said the general.

"Mr. Hamilton seems——" began Mrs. Wintringham, starting to take the letter from its envelope preparatory to reading it to her husband,—but at the sound of descending footsteps upon the stairs she stopped speaking and turned sympathetically toward the door. The general held out his hand and Molly, smiling in the same stiff fashion that she had when in her own room, approached him.

"My dear," he said, encircling her with his arm and imprinting a kiss upon her forehead, "you have this day encountered adversity for the first time, and you have borne it bravely; you have met temptation and have conquered it; you have conscientiously lived up to those high principles which your dear grandmother and I have endeavored to instill, and I trust that you

will erelong experience that sense of joyousness which is the reward of well-doing.

"We are proud and happy that our granddaughter has shown a desire to express in her daily life the highest ideals of womanhood. Marks and prizes mean little, my child, when compared to the upbuilding of character. It is our desire that you may always act as you have to-day, that you may continue to be both honest and honorable, no matter at what personal sacrifice. You will find that in the great crises of life there is only one right way. See to it, my child, that you set your feet firmly therein and unwaveringly follow it. Never allow your sense of duty to be weakened by any consideration of personal loss or gain."

He kissed her again.

"I'll try, Grandfather," Molly replied, smiling again her stiff smile, "only to-day there wasn't any temptation, you see. I cheated on my essay, even though I didn't mean to, and, of course, I couldn't recite it." The possibility of violating an abstract moral principle did not occur to her.

Her grandparents exchanged gratified glances.

"Darling," said Mrs. Wintringham, "Ellen made a delicious chocolate cake this afternoon. Wouldn't you like a piece?"

"Oh!" Molly's smile lost its stiffness. "Where is it?"

"In the pantry."

Whereat she made a hasty exit.

"Are you sure that you did not offer the cake as consolation just a trifle too soon?" queried the general.

"Perhaps I did," acquiesced his wife, "but she deserves it, poor baby!"

When Molly reached the pantry she found her brother ahead of her. He had relieved the fat, round, chocolate-covered mound of a considerable wedge.

"Hal, did you ask Little Mama if you could have any?"

"Nope." He bit deep into the toothsome mass, making no further reply.

Molly helped herself liberally. Then she bethought her. Here was an opportunity to put into practice the suggestion as to deportment which she had so lately received.

"Hal," she said, smiling as forcibly as a mouthful of very good cake would permit, "there's been a mistake about the prize essay. I didn't win any prize at all."

"Huh!" ejaculated Hal. "What d' you mean?"

"It was a mistake, that's all," reiterated Molly, smiling still harder, though her eyes grew suddenly moist. "But I don't mind it a bit,—that is, not much. I suppose that Genevieve will be second now and Ray will be first. Don't you tell any one."

"What'd they do that for?" inquired Hal, aggressively. "Yours is a whole heap better'n that old sissy's."

"They didn't do it," said Molly, less smilingly, "but I found out to-day that I got part of mine from a book. I forgot all about having read it, and so it would be cheating. I'll tell Miss Mitchell on Monday."

Hal made no reply at all to this explanation, but he looked into Molly's face with an expression in his eyes that had never been there before and which, for some reason, sent a warm wave of comfort over her whole body. When he spoke it was on a different subject.

"The fellers think my pants is great," he said.

"They were wishin' they had some, too, but their mothers don't know how to make 'em."

"I'll make them." Molly took fire at once and forgot her own troubles.

"They saved up an' got enough stuff for 'em," explained Hal, "but I was the only one that could get 'em made."

"I'll do it," reiterated Molly.

"Thanks." Hal spoke somewhat shamefacedly. He had known that she would.

"I'll make them just the same size as yours, only longer, because you all measure just about the same around. They can try theirs on in the barn. There will be eight, won't there? I'm glad I didn't throw away your old ones that I ripped up for a pattern."

Molly radiated cheerfulness under the stimulus of this delightful new responsibility. She was about to fit out a baseball team with cream color and blue uniforms. She had made a tremendous success of Hal's and had received many compliments.

At tea the most cheerful subjects were discussed, and those farthest removed from school in general and prize essays in particular, prominent among them being Hal's prospective visit to New York. Hal had a quarter saved in his bank for the express purpose of spending it in the metropolis. Twenty-five cents was a considerable amount of money, and the collecting of it had been a painful matter, as Molly well knew. Never but once had Hal acquired money easily, and that was when he had allowed the boys to hold his grandfather's pistol, at two cents a minute.

"I wish that I were going," Molly spoke plaintively.

"Perhaps you will some day, dearie," returned her grandmother. "Let us hope that Hal will prove him-

self such a little gentleman that they will want to meet you, too."

Hal cast down his eyes disgustedly and excused himself the first moment that propriety permitted. He disliked personalities. The banging of the screen door proclaimed the fact that he had passed through the kitchen and out of the house.

"Molly, call your brother and tell him that I do not wish him to go off the place. I disapprove," continued the general, turning to his wife, "of a boy of his age being in the streets in the evening, and with those hoodlums, too."

Molly returned in a moment, breathless.

"He's gone, Grandfather. He was running across the orchard as hard as he could."

"He is very disobedient," the old man spoke severely. "I shall await him here in the dining-room, where I can hear him re-enter the house. This thing has continued long enough. I must take matters firmly in hand and have a decided talk with him. My dear," he turned again to his wife, "the rearing of a boy entails heavy responsibilities."

But the general was not destined to reason with his grandson that evening. Ellen transmitted certain intelligence to Ludwig, who, being no less than the hoodlums Hal's willing henchman, stationed himself at the farther end of the orchard to await the little boy's return, which occurred nearly an hour later. In his hand he carried a white paper bag.

A whispered conclave followed, with the result that Hal skirted the fence for a considerable distance and returned to the house by way of the vegetable garden. Having tied the bag around his neck by a string, of which he always carried a supply, he shifted it so

that it hung down his back well out of his way and then climbed up the grape arbor to the roof of the kitchen porch. From there it was but a step to his room.

Ten minutes later Ellen entered the dining-room, her face mildly indignant.

"An' there's no use a waitin' fer the poor bye," she said, "an' him in bed asleep this long toime sence."

The general and his wife were still sitting at the dining-table, patiently awaiting the return of their erring grandson. Molly was busy with Jack over his weekly lesson.

"Molly dear," called her grandmother, "see if Hal is in his room."

"All right, Little Mama."

In a moment she replied, "Yes, he is in bed."

In mystified silence Hal's grandparents betook themselves to the library.

"Molly must have been mistaken about seeing him cross the orchard," said Mrs. Wintringham, "but how strange for him to go to bed so early. I think that I will go up and see if he is ill."

Hal, however, was not ill. He was apparently sleeping the sleep of youth and innocence.

Molly was very tired when she finally made her way to her own room. For the first time the weekly lesson had dragged. It had been a strain not to let Jack know about the essay and to keep up a pretense of cheerfulness. She had almost a sense of deceiving him, as though he had a right to share whatever was in her mind. But she had kept her own counsels, determined that he should know only that each of them had tried for a prize, and that each of them had failed.

Slowly she drew the comb through her curls, slowly

she undressed and made ready for bed, and slowly she crept beneath the covers. Her heart was heavy as she laid her head upon the pillow, but she had scarcely done so when she sat upright, for her hand had come in contact with a hard, round something evidently beneath it, which she had not put there. Instantly her fingers closed around it and then again as before on that same evening a warm wave of comfort pervaded her. She understood in a flash what had happened. Hal had gone across the orchard and to the village by the back path to expend his precious quarter in purchasing a bag of chocolates for her, to console her for losing the prize. She put one of the chocolates in her mouth and then rose softly and tried the door leading into the adjoining room. It was usually bolted on the other side, but to-night it yielded to her touch.

"Hal," she whispered.

"What?"

She knelt beside his bed, while he drew the bed-clothes up almost, but not quite, over his face.

"Thank you, Hal," she said.

She threw her arm over him and kissed the little scrap of cheek visible in the moonlight.

"Aw," replied Hal, moving uneasily beneath the unwonted caress.

But Molly did not feel rebuffed. She tucked a candy under the coverlid where his mouth seemed likely to be, and then rose softly and returned to her own room.

CHAPTER X

"HULLY gee, fellers, ain't thim the swell ones, though!"

Tim O'Tool craned his neck better to get the effect of the new, almost finished baseball trousers. Hal was on his knees beside him, engaged in turning up the bottoms to the required length, according to his sister's instructions. A paper of pins lay on the floor near by.

"Ouch, yer stickin' me!" Tim squirmed under the ordeal.

"Hold still, can't you," commanded Hal. "How do you s'pose I can fix 'em if you draw your leg up that way? Here, that's about right, ain't it?" He turned to Mike Donovan for approval. Mike was the tallest of the group of hoodlums who were gathered about the two principals in various attitudes of admiring attention.

"Yep, but do you s'pose she'll get mine big enough?"

Mike surveyed his lanky extremities dubiously.

"I attended to all that," returned Hal loftily. "She's goin' to make 'em the same size around; you ain't no bigger'n me around, but different lengths. Yours will be ready in a few minutes. She was stitchin' on the tape along the sides when I went in the last time. I'll go in again when these are done."

He went on with his work, and silence fell upon the others, to be broken a few minutes later by Mike: "Say, when're yer goin' to Noo Yawk?"

"As soon as school closes," returned Hal.

"Want us ter see yer off?" inquired Tim. "We fellers were talkin' 'bout it an' we thought as how we could all come together at the station an' give the 'Young Apache's Yell.'"

Hal hesitated. Full dearly he loved the band of which he was chief, but to have them *en masse* at the station, where they would draw upon themselves the stern gaze of his grandfather and the pained disapproval of Little Mama, to say nothing of Molly, did not quite satisfy his sense of fitness.

"I was planning to have you different places along the road," he said, "an' I could throw out farewell presents."

"All right, that'll be great!" exclaimed Mike enthusiastically. "Let's give the yell now instead." Whereat eight lusty little throats emitted blood-curdling whoops, ending up with, "Black Hawk! Black Hawk! Black Hawk!"—Hal's cognomen in hoodlumdom.

Finally the last of the four pairs of trousers that had reached the trying-on stage was pinned to the proper length, and he returned to the house with his armful.

Molly was in her room, her cheeks scarlet with excitement. She had not stopped after school, in spite of the fact that she knew the note which she gave Miss Mitchell in the morning to have concerned the prize essay. She had no time for anything but trousers, for she had spent nearly all of the preceding Saturday on them.

"They fit great," said Hal, returning from the barn with those that had been tried on, "and the fellers think you are all right!"

"Do they?" murmured Molly, looking up from biting a thread. "I'll have the rest ready in about an hour. That's as much time as I can give them to-day. I've lots of lessons for to-morrow."

Thus dismissed, Hal returned to his cronies, who were sitting on the curb of the barn door or lying upon the grass.

Meanwhile Molly worked indefatigably. She did not see her adored teacher enter the gate and walk briskly up the gravel path between the pines and the locusts to the porch. The library windows were open, as was the front door, and the soft, sweet breeze stirred gently the ivy vines over the window. The general and his wife were sitting there, keeping watch on the road, for Eleanor Mitchell had telephoned that she would arrive shortly after school. Mrs. Wintringham met her at the door.

"We feel guilty, Miss Mitchell," she said, "to have sent for you to-day, but we need detain you but a very few minutes. It seemed to us that we would be freer here than elsewhere. You ought to be out this moment roaming the hills."

"It is a glorious day, isn't it?" Eleanor answered with enthusiasm, "and that is precisely what I intend doing."

"My dear," said the general, when the usual polite formalities had been disposed of, "would it not be well for you to acquaint Miss Mitchell with the reason for thus summoning her to Locust Cottage? You have the matter more clearly in hand."

Eleanor looked from one to the other curiously.

"I will be as brief as possible," began the little lady, her face growing sober. "Molly came to me in tears last Friday afternoon, to inform me that she could not

accept the first prize, inasmuch as she had suddenly recalled an event which happened nearly a year ago and of which we were all completely ignorant. She copied a paragraph from Emerson into her diary, it seems, and forgot it absolutely, until it was recalled to her by reading it elsewhere. She used it in her essay."

"The darling!" Eleanor's face softened. "I felt sure that it was a quotation, and I've racked my brains to discover its source, but could not bear to hurt the child questioning her. That is what comes of an antipathy to Emerson of which I am heartily ashamed."

"My little Molly is strictly honorable," said Mrs. Wintringham.

"Naturally." The general emphasized his remark by a nod. "I recognized it immediately," he continued, "but supposed it quite permissible to quote in that way."

"It is," said Eleanor, "if the author be mentioned. Oh, I have it! All Molly need do is to introduce Emerson's name into the opening paragraph. I can explain the matter to the judges. To have her read and appreciate such an author is really just as praiseworthy as to have evolved the sentiment from her own inner consciousness."

"Quite so," acquiesced the general, "and yet, as the matter stands, we cannot but feel that we would be doing her an injustice to make the change which you suggest, and which we discussed ourselves. There is a moral question involved, which we dislike to ignore."

The little English teacher's face grew blank.

"You see, Miss Mitchell," explained her hostess, "Molly behaved so well in the matter and made the

sacrifice so bravely that we think she will become a nobler and a stronger woman if we allow it to remain as it is. To alter the conditions now would tend to make her feel, quite unconsciously, of course, that the hardships of life can always be smoothed out and things brought about to one's own advantage and satisfaction."

If Eleanor had given in to her feelings at that moment, she would have dropped into the vernacular of her college days and have said, "Rubbish!"

As it was, however, she preserved a serious expression and resorted to argument. "Don't you think, Mrs. Wintringham," she began, "that Molly is sufficiently strong to meet bravely the real trials of life as they arise? Somehow, I can't help but feel that this is just a bit unnecessary, especially as she has already shown her character so decidedly."

"Yes, in a sense," admitted Mrs. Wintringham, who favored that view herself. She looked hopefully at her husband as she spoke, but he, scenting the possibility of her defection, interpolated firmly:

"My wife and I discussed the matter at considerable length and came at last to the belief that we must allow Molly to bear alone this first small cross, in order that she may be strengthened to bear the greater crosses which may be hers. We suffer with her, and we appreciate your kindness, but we feel obliged, for our granddaughter's own good, to refuse your offer. I am sure that you will understand."

Eleanor murmured, "Certainly I shall," but she felt a sense of helpless anger.

"The first prize will go to Raymond Collins," she said, "if Molly drops out, and——" She stopped short.

"To whom will the second prize go?" inquired Mrs. Wintringham.

"I am not prepared to say; I must consult the judges first. Where is Molly now?"

"Up in her room sewing on her machine." Mrs. Wintringham smiled. "She is making boys' trousers."

"Boys' trousers!"

"Yes, she is constructing baseball uniforms for nine little lads, her brother included, from unbleached muslin and pale blue tape, and she is so happy over the responsibility that she has forgotten all about the essay. Dear Mrs. Heaton has been giving her sewing lessons, and this is the result. The machine belonged to her mother."

"That must have been what Hal meant. On Saturday I passed him at the head of a number of small boys, and he was telling them that some one, Molly, I presume, could use the machine 'great,'" Eleanor laughed, "and that she would 'make theirs.'"

CHAPTER XI

“MY DEAR, Molly has shown the finest breeding throughout this period of painful expectancy, for to await an event which was to have given her the victor’s crown, a crown that a nice sense of honor upon her part has forced her to relinquish, cannot but be painful. Let us endeavor throughout the morrow to keep constantly in her mind the happiest of images, and—ahem!”—the general removed his glasses—“and would it not be well to present her with the pearl ring of her mother’s, with which we had intended to signalize the eighteenth anniversary of her birth?”

The old man avoided his wife’s scrutiny. That the ring was much too fine for a girl of fifteen he well knew. His reference was to the rhetoricals, a yearly event of almost as much importance as commencement day itself. Upon this early spring occasion the winners of prizes in composition were wont to declaim their own effusions to the admiration and satisfaction of their families and the townsfolk as well, since it was a sympathetic community. The competition was open only to sophomores, and Molly would never again have a chance to compete.

Mrs. Wintringham paused before answering, since her husband’s suggestion occasioned her considerable surprise. She had adjusted herself to the contemplation of Molly’s doing good for its own sake. This sudden shifting of ideals required a moment’s space. Then she exclaimed with great heartiness:

"The very thing! It will harmonize beautifully with the pendant that Mr. Hamilton brought her. She must wear it to-morrow evening as a matter of course. It will be a satisfaction to her to know that her choicest piece of jewelry is an heirloom, rather than a gift."

Still her husband did not look at her. He returned to his perusal of the morning's paper with much rattling of the sheets and a succession of coughs, which rendered speech unnecessary. He was painfully aware of an inconsistency in his behavior. He knew, too, that there would hover around his wife's lips that tender sympathetic little half-smile which always made him feel absurdly young and inconsequential, a smile so slight that one could not with propriety question its cause. He preferred not to encounter it.

"Another famine in China!" he exclaimed. "Thousands dying of hunger!" to which his wife made reply:

"I am so glad. How her dear eyes will dance when I tell her about it!"

"What!" exclaimed the general.

But Mrs. Wintringham continued. "Her feet are barely touching ground as it is, with all the pretty things that Mr. Hamilton brought her. And how delicately it was accomplished! Henry——" She paused abruptly.

"What is it, my dear?" The general looked carefully around the edge of the paper, and then, seeing no signs of humorous appreciation lurking at the corners of his wife's lips, brought his entire countenance into view.

"Has it ever occurred to you that Mr. Hamilton shows a rather remarkable interest in Molly? How very satisfactory it would be if, as the years progress

and she matures into a woman, that interest should ripen into——” But Mrs. Wintringham was not destined to finish her observation. The general broke in sternly, his sense of his own dignity happily restored.

“My dear, you must struggle against the harboring of all such ideas. Although you are, as I have often remarked, the most perfect of your sex, nevertheless at times you show evidence (in less degree, I must admit, than any of the other women whom I have met) of some of the minor frailties which are bound up in the fiber of the feminine constitution, one of which is——ahem!——” He shifted his gaze uneasily back to his paper and his voice became less resonant,—he had encountered the smile. “One of which is the building up into the semblance of reality sentimental trifles, which are mere vapors, unsubstantial nothings. Molly is a child, while Mr. Hamilton is a man of the world, and very likely has already set his affection elsewhere. He, no doubt, feels for her the fatherly affection so often entertained by older men toward young girls.”

Mrs. Wintringham sighed. It would have been pleasant to have discussed Molly’s possible future with some one, nevertheless she admired her husband for his present firmness of attitude, no less than for his weakness of a moment since.

When Molly entered the dining-room the next morning, a little late for breakfast, it was almost as though a blaze of sunlight had suddenly streamed from behind a cloud. Both grandparents had been awaiting her with some apprehension, but their fears for her placidity of mind had evidently been groundless. The content which illumined her face could not have been the outcome of mere breeding.

"Excuse me for being late," she said, "but when I woke up I felt so happy that I began to think all sorts of lovely thoughts. I made believe that I was going to Europe, and I pretended to arrive in Paris, and I had just got to the hotel, when the breakfast bell rang. I shut my eyes and it was as real as—— Oh, what is that? Did Mr. Hamilton send it?"

She had caught sight of the little green velvet box beside her plate.

"Oh, Little Mama! Oh, Grandfather!—thank you so much! My mother's ring!" She slipped it upon her finger and carried it to her lips.

The general secured his handkerchief and applied it without shame to his eyes.

"Yes, my child," he said, "your dear mother's ring. It was to have been presented to you upon a later occasion, but in view of the festivities to-night at the Beeches, and er—er—in view of other considerations, we have decided to give it to you now, with the understanding that it shall be used only upon especial occasions, very especial occasions." His voice grew stronger as he advanced, though no less tender, and lost its huskiness.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Molly held her hand toward the window, moving it a little this way and that in the light, then she kissed Mrs. Wintringham and after that her grandfather. She would have liked to kiss Hal, she felt so overflowing with love, but refrained, casting a regretful glance in his direction.

"I stopped just a moment to look at my pendant and slippers and stockings and gloves," she added, as she took her place at the table. "I feel like Cinderella. Why, I am just a little like Cinderella," she laughed, as a happy thought struck her, "for I'm going to the

Palace of the Prince. I wonder whether he will dance with me? But perhaps we won't dance."

General and Mrs. Wintringham exchanged startled glances, but Molly's mind had already left the dangerous subject,—she did not pursue the career of Cinderella and the Prince to its legitimate conclusion.

"I'm so glad that I have an opera cape. Wasn't it lovely of Mr. Hamilton to bring me one from Paris? And you must wear your blue velvet gown. The evenings are quite cool. I don't believe that he has ever seen it. You do look so sweet in it. Won't it be fine to whizz up to the schoolhouse in an automobile and then off to a party when it is over, and isn't Jack's mother mean not to go to the rhetoricals?"

"I did not know that she was in the habit of attending such affairs," said the general.

"Jack is going, and he asked her to go with him," explained Molly.

"One can scarcely blame her." Mrs. Wintringham spoke soothingly. "She is unduly sensitive, as you know."

"I think that she is horrid,"—Molly made no effort at ladylike control,—“and I hate her. I don't see why Jack's father had to fall in love with his mother's maid. Think of all the unhappiness it has made for Jack!"

"Hate is a very undignified word," said Mrs. Wintringham reprovingly, "and, aside from that, no lady ever entertains hatred or any feeling whatever of a violent nature toward an inferior."

"Not," the general hastened to amend, "that we are to look upon any other individual as an inferior, in the sense of being of less worth than we ourselves. Your grandmother means that we should not feel unkindly toward those who by reason of their birth or their

lack of educational advantages are not equipped to meet us on an intellectual level. In this free and glorious country, for which so many of her sons gave up their lives, there can be no high and no low."

When he had finished, his voice vibrant with the emotion natural to one who had commanded in battle, Molly replied, "I can't like her, for she is not kind to Jack. He never said so, but I have heard the way she speaks to him myself, and other people have heard, too."

"If she is unworthy," insisted the general, "eliminate her entirely from your consciousness."

At this, Hal, who had finished his breakfast, excused himself on the plea of having to do an example. He was antipathetic to personal discussions, especially when clothed in language philosophic.

"There comes Mr. Hamilton now in the touring car! Perhaps he is going to take me to ride!"

Molly was at the door before the young man had come to a stop before the gate.

"Hello, little girl!" he called, waving his hand in response to her greeting. "Do you know of any one at Locust Cottage who would enjoy a spin this beautiful May morning?"

"I would, we all would!" Molly carolled back,—“at least, I think so. And, oh, Mr. Hamilton, couldn't we take Harold? He has never been in an automobile. I know he would enjoy it. He is so darling and I want you to see him. He wears the sweetest little suits now with bloomers."

"Yes, indeed, he may come. We will stop at the Home and pick him up. But I came particularly to call on old Ellen."

"On Ellen!" exclaimed Molly, meeting the young

man midway of the path, and giving him both her hands in response to his invitation.

"Yes," he replied, "on old Ellen. I had an idea last night, and I stopped in the village on the way here to put it into execution,—that is, my share of it. Ellen will have to do the rest."

Molly ushered Walter Hamilton into the library in mystified silence, to his evident enjoyment.

"Little Mama!" she exclaimed, "Mr. Hamilton came to call on Ellen. He wants us all to go automobiling, but he came really to see Ellen. I'll go for her."

Leaving further explanations to their guest, Molly hurried away to summon the maid-of-all-work, who appeared in a moment, whereupon Walter gravely presented her with a pair of gold spectacles.

"Why, Ellen doesn't wear glasses!" Molly exclaimed, unguardedly.

"But that's not sayin' as now I niver will," returned Ellen, "an' thim so illigent! An' look at the gold rims of 'em! Aye, an' it's the foine lady I'll be for ye!"

She adjusted them carefully, Molly assisting with the ends, which turned down around her ears, and then Ellen made her way to the mirror, into which she gazed with evident delight while the rest watched in amused sympathy.

"Aye, an' I can see mesel' as plain as the sun in the marnin', that I can." She gazed from one to the other. "An' ye look no more like yersel's than me han', yer that handsome."

"That is as it should be, Ellen; the better you see us the handsomer we appear." Walter laughed. "And now I want your primer," he said. Molly rushed off for it, and returned immediately, opening at the last story. She handed it to the old woman.

"Tommy was a little boy," Ellen read glibly, "who lived with his mother in a shmall rid house on the top av th' hill."

She stopped, an expression of incredulous amazement spreading over her face and no less over the faces of her hearers. She removed the glasses and looked again at the page.

"Be the saints above," she cried, "without 'em I can't read a wurrd, nary a wurrd. It's bewitched they are."

She returned them to her nose, Molly again assisting. She looked over Ellen's shoulder to make sure that she was in truth reading the text.

"Tommy said to his mother, 'Mother may I go out with me sled'——"

"She is really reading it!" Molly's eyes opened wide. "She can read all right! She just couldn't see!"

"And none of us ever thought of spectacles," sighed Mrs. Wintringham. She was recalling her unavailing efforts as Ellen's teacher.

"Ellen," she turned to the dazed old woman, "could you read when you were a young girl?"

"Sure, mum, an' I could, along wid the best av 'em, but it all left me afore I was fifty year. I forgot all me larnin' so as I couldn't tell B from a bull's foot, that I couldn't."

"But you could read, just the same," said Molly, "only you couldn't see."

"An' sure I couldn't read a wurrd axcipt on the first two pages of me book."

"That's because the letters were so large," insisted Molly, "and, Little Mama, I think that she knew some of the words from the pictures."

"That I did," returned Ellen, "but now—sure them is holy glasses. I'll say a prayer fer 'em the eve."

Presently she placed them back on her eyes.

"An' thank ye kindly, sor—fer yer kindness to a pore old woman. God bless ye, as have give me back me gift ter read as I had fifty year ago an' more an' lost altogether come this tin year."

So saying, courtesying and laughing and weeping all in one, Ellen backed through the library door and into the hall.

CHAPTER XII

"GEE! the general must have struck luck," George O'Halloran whispered to Daisy Dennis, "get on to the cut of Molly! Mr. Hamilton looks like he was stuck on her, the way he's eyin' her. He's a swell all right. Those must be diamonds hangin' from her neck."

Daisy, plump, pink-cheeked, and complacent, looked around at Molly, who sat two or three rows behind her.

"She made that dress herself," she said, "and Mr. Hamilton brought her the opera coat and the pendant, because his picture that Molly sat for won the prize. It was five thousand dollars. Ma saw it all in the paper. He'd orter brought her more, when she won all that for him."

Further confidences were cut short by a movement upon the platform, although the prize speaking was not an immediate event. After the kindly rector had finished his introductory remarks, the leading soprano from the Methodist Church and the tenor from the Episcopal choir rendered comparatively well the dungeon song from "Aida"; then followed one of Liszt's Rhapsodies, rendered not at all well by the only male music teacher in the town, who succeeded in making an impressive noise and in creating a large amount of admiring awe in the majority of his audience, in spite of its growing restlessness. Then came the an-

nouncement of the first prize winner. Many eyes were turned toward Molly, whose cheeks had become the purest carmine and glowed intensely against the snowy whiteness of her forehead and neck. Her eyes were like flames.

It was Raymond Collins, however, who stepped into the aisle and sedately, though with stiff angularity, advanced toward the platform, his fat white face expressing dignified reserve, his thin body painfully erect. The usual impartial round of applause greeted him as he mounted to his place, and then in a self-satisfied, leisurely, and distinct voice he gave his oration. When he had finished he bowed, received the prize, and left the platform, as cool and unmoved as when he had begun. Again arose the kindly appreciative applause. Hambletonians were equally proud of their school and of its products. The little neat boy had written a very nice essay, all of them agreed, and they were anxious to give him due honor.

More musical selections followed. The bass singer from the Episcopal choir outdid himself in the Anvil song, then the elocution teacher, who came to town twice a week to give private lessons, recited a selection from "The Rivals," which though clearly beyond the appreciation of the audience—save of a few—was received with generous enthusiasm. All the while Molly's blood coursed more swiftly, and her breath came faster and faster, until it seemed as though she must sing or shout or do something to relieve the tension.

Then—

It—the great event toward which for days her every thought had strained—began to take place. A new sympathetic expression came over the faces of the three judges, who occupied positions of honor upon

the platform. One of them spoke to the others and they glanced down the central aisle. The manner of the principal also perceptibly changed, as he arose and approached the front of the platform. People from all directions turned toward Molly, imagining, as a matter of course, that the change was due to the fact that the second prize had been won by a girl.

When Mr. Raeburn said that it gave him pleasure,—and this time there could be no doubt about the pleasure,—to announce that the second prize had been awarded to Jack Gordon, and that he would now favor them with his essay, which was entitled “Thoughts from the Fields,” dead silence enshrouded the room, and Jack lost considerable of his color as he rose to his feet. It seemed for a moment as though he were not to receive the welcome that had been accorded Raymond Collins, at which he held himself more proudly erect, as he was wont to do when of old he had been forced to trundle his bundles of washing past people whom he knew, and then there arose an uproar which was deafening. The audience had been stunned, that was all,—among the rest, the general and his wife, and Mrs. Heaton and Walter Hamilton.

At sight of Jack in his well-made gray suit, his fair hair sweeping back from his broad brow, his fine strong bronzed face tense with feeling, every one in that audience formed a contrasting picture of a barefooted boy, in patched blue overalls and wearing a ragged hat, bending over long furrows in their own or their neighbors’ fields, or calling unostentatiously at their own or their neighbors’ back doors of a Monday or Tuesday, to return with equal unostentation later in the week. And every one in that audience realized, also quite suddenly, that the boy, whether clad

in overalls or in the habiliments of a gentleman, had won respect and affection from each of them. The applause rose and fell, and rose again. It was, as has been said, a generously appreciative audience; many among them knew of Jack's successful efforts to obtain an education, and there were a few who knew of Molly's share therein.

Jack's eyes grew darkly blue, as they were in the habit of doing when he was happily excited. They traveled over the rows of heads until he met Molly's gaze, and then, in a voice showing power and resonance and the unmistakable effects of culture, he began:

"There is wonderful peace out in the fields. There is no strife where the blades of corn come up so gently through the brown earth, and the winds and the sunshine invite them to live."

It was a remarkable essay for a lad of seventeen,—every one said so,—and failed to see why it had not been awarded the first prize. The judges wondered why also, and acted uncomfortably conscious of an error in their decision. The roughnesses in composition, such as there were, could not be detected by the ear alone.

From that moment there came a change toward Jack Gordon in the attitude of his fellows. When the program was ended they crowded around him to grasp his hand and wring it. Raymond Collins and his "Ideals" were forgotten.

"My boy," the general spoke in his most impressive manner, "allow me to felicitate you upon your remarkable achievement and upon the widening horizon which now stretches before you. I trust that a brilliant future career awaits you."

Walter Hamilton grasped his hand with all the

earnestness and fellowship of equality, and praised him as he would have praised a brother artist; while Mrs. Heaton and Mrs. Wintringham and Miss Mitchell congratulated him in voices which were not entirely controlled, and with eyes which, as they looked into his, were unusually soft. The pathos of the struggle as they had seen it was in their minds.

When it was all over, and the rhetorical were a thing of the past, Molly still loved to dwell upon the events of that evening. It seemed ever fresh in her mind.

"Weren't you surprised, Little Mama?" she would ask for the hundredth time, to which Mrs. Wintringham would give unfailing response:

"Yes, darling, I was. We all were. How wonderfully well you kept the secret!"

"And didn't Jack look splendid as he walked up the aisle?"

"Yes, indeed, he did, and how very kind Mr. Hamilton was to him," the old lady was wont to add. "Mr. Hamilton is in every respect a gentleman, one of the stamp which existed when I was a girl. I am glad you see here before you such perfect examples of manly breeding as those afforded you by your dear grandfather and Mr. Hamilton."

She would not for the world have said one word to lessen in Molly's eyes Jack's good qualities, but in spite of her assurance that Molly was too gently bred, too innately refined, to develop an undue affection for a young man whose mother did day's work and took in washings, she had become uncomfortably aware, since the evening of the rhetorical, that Jack's father had been a gentleman of good lineage. She formulated

none of this into words, but it led her to speak more often of Mr. Hamilton and in a more complimentary vein than she would otherwise have done. She, no less than her husband, was an exponent of the principle which asserts that all men are equal.

It was during one of these talks, when they were sitting on the front porch among the roses, the general having been called to the potato field to oversee Ludwig's endeavors, that Molly said suddenly:

"I am so happy, Little Mama. I feel it all over, way down to the tips of my fingers. And just think,—if I hadn't lost the prize, Jack would not have gained it! Aren't you glad that I lost it?"

Mrs. Wintringham hesitated a moment until she was quite sure of her sentiments upon this head, and then she answered:

"Yes, dear, very glad. It means more to Jack in the creating of ambition and in sense of achievement than it could have to you."

"But I didn't mean that,—I meant, just because it was he who received it,—because it made him happy."

Mrs. Wintringham vouchsafed no reply to this, but continued to stroke Molly's hair. "When do you go to the Beeches?" she asked, "to pose for Mr. Hamilton's new picture?"

"On Monday. Oh, hasn't he been sweet to me! I simply love my pendant, and it was such fun to have the things to wear to the party. He said that I looked—" she hesitated—"beautiful." She brought out the word with difficulty, blushing vividly. "But, of course," she hastened to add, "I understand perfectly that it was the beautiful clothes which made me seem so, and my freckles don't show so much at night."

Mrs. Wintringham said nothing and Molly's mind returned to its previous train of thought.

"Jack's getting the prize was the silver lining—only it was gold, wasn't it?" her laugh rang out gaily. "It was a ten-dollar gold piece, you know. Why, everything nice that has happened," Molly continued, "came from something that seemed hard—only I didn't realize! If Hal hadn't been naughty and stolen his best clothes to go to the Beeches in, perhaps we wouldn't have known Mrs. Heaton, at least not for a long time—not in time for Mr. Hamilton to paint 'Youth Triumphant' before he went to Paris—and that's why he gave me the clothes and my sweet pearl pendant." She sat bolt upright and turned around to face her grandmother, her hands upon her knees, her face filled with wonder and enthusiasm, as the bigness of the thought slowly unfolded itself, "Why, Little Mama, it's just like a regular plan. If Hal hadn't hurt my feelings the time I got his clothes ready, I wouldn't have gone out to Grandfather's chair, where Jack was helping Ludwig, and then he wouldn't have felt to come over to me—he says he felt it—he had to come—and that it was the voice of God. Why, Little Mama,"—Molly's breath came very fast now—"it's all the voice of God, isn't it?"

"Yes, darling. That is what is meant by the hymn that we sang last Sunday,

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform."

"Only we don't always know that it is God, do we?"

"No, dear. If we could only believe that, we would be more gentle, more submissive, more ready to say, 'Thy will, not mine, be done.'"

"But God's will is done anyway, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear."

"Then I don't see what we have to do with it."

Mrs. Wintringham waited a bit before replying. She was getting upon dangerous ground.

"God is all powerful," she replied, seeking refuge in generalities, "and all wise. He knows what is best for us."

"But grandfather said that each one of us was a free moral agent. How can we be, if God rules and everything happens as He wants it? Hal had to be unkind and—why, Jack wouldn't have won the prize if he hadn't!"

Molly laughed joyously as her thought returned to its favorite theme. To Mrs. Wintringham's relief, she left the world-old question as to the exact part played in the scheme of the universe by the human will. Without any seeming reason for her transition she said suddenly, "Little Mama, I love night better than day, and winter better than summer. I think the fine black branches, twisted into such beautiful patterns against the sky in winter when it is all red, are prettier than the green leaves. And the snow is like a lovely white robe, all woven with silver thread and shining in the sun. I wish that it were winter now. Most people like summer best, or anyway spring. Jack loves winter too, just as I do, and night, with all the stars. It's so still at night, and you feel so good, and everything about you is so dignified. Isn't it a funny thing, Little Mama?" Molly spoke dreamily.

"Yes, dear, it is. I never knew before that you felt that way. Some day when you are old enough you must read 'Johannes Agricola,' by Robert Browning.

You will study him later. It contains a beautiful description of night."

"Oh, I'd love to!"

Again silence, and the purring of Rex, the great Persian cat, who stretched and made himself at home in Molly's lap. Ellen's voice, now completely happy, came crooningly to them from the kitchen porch, where she was reading aloud to herself.

"And Ellen's being able to read, too," said Molly, recurring to her previous train of thought, "and Miss Mitchell and Mr. Hamilton being such friends, for it was I who first told Mrs. Heaton all about her and now she loves her dearly. Miss Mitchell and Mr. Hamilton played tennis nearly every day after the rhetorical. I guess that he likes her a lot. She is the most beautiful person I know, next to you and Mrs. Heaton."

"They were together every day?" queried Mrs. Wintringham.

"Yes," said Molly, "until the very day before she sailed for Europe, and he went to the boat with her to see her off. Miss Mitchell looked lovely in her white tennis suit, with a pink ribbon around her head."

Mrs. Wintringham smiled faintly. She felt a sense of shame at her own late weakness, together with increased admiration for her husband. She had, indeed, been guilty of evincing one of the frailties of her sex. She made up her mind to conquer it.

CHAPTER XIII

MOLLY was awakened by the sound of a door softly closing in the small hallway upon which her own door opened. Then she laughed to herself, and striking a match, looked at the clock on the table by her bed. It was midnight. From below arose to her attentive ears the sounds of a search. She knew them well,—the accidental little bumps into things, and the long pauses before Hal dared to take another step. No doubt he was hunting for the cake which she had hidden in the secret cupboard. She wondered what he would say when, some day, after they were entirely grown, she should show it to him. Where must he imagine things disappeared to!

Presently she heard him return, and to her surprise there shone from under his door a line of light. Instantly she ceased from her laughter. Once before when he had been ill he had gone downstairs by himself in quest of Jamaica ginger, and had lighted his lamp afterward. Molly rose quietly and opened the door. A strange sight met her eyes. The lamp was on the floor and Hal, in his pink pajamas, was kneeling beside the open bottom drawer of his chiffonier, most of the contents of which were strewn about the floor. His black hair was on end. But none of these things constituted the strangeness of the encounter,—it lay in the fact that he was crying. In an instant she forgot that he was a boy and that boys are

averse to affectionate demonstration, and was on her knees beside him, her arm around his shoulders.

"What's the matter, Hal?"

"The fellers'll all be waitin' on the road to-morrow," he said, "for me to throw farewell presents out to them, and I ain't got anything."

He wiped his eyes and tried to hold his lips firm, drawing away meanwhile from Molly's embrace.

"I'm awfully sorry, Hal, and you spent a whole quarter on me!"

"That's all right," he returned, quickly lowering his eyes to hide the gleam of pleasure which his sister's recognition of his sacrifice brought into them.

"It wouldn't have to be much, would it?" said Molly.

"No, 'most anything would do," he replied mournfully, "s'long's I gave it to them." He was free from any self-laudation,—he was merely stating a fact.

"It's just for a souvenir, I suppose," Molly pursued.

"Yes, just for a souvenir," acquiesced Hal.

Suddenly her face grew animated. "I know what!" she said, rising to her feet.

"What?" echoed Hal. He had supreme faith in his sister's ability to make things come out right somehow. He would never voluntarily have told her of his trouble, but he was not sorry that she had discovered it. Molly was not such a bad sort, after all, now that she had given up correcting his grammar.

She disappeared into her room, to reappear in an incredibly short time with something hidden behind her back.

"Guess!" she said, her face bright and mischievous between the black curls which hung on each side of her cheeks.

"Can't," said Hal. There were at least twenty boys to be arranged for.

For answer Molly brought her hand into view, whereat Hal's face lost its dejection and almost broke into a smile.

"Wish grandfather'n Little Mama weren't goin' to the station."

"Why, Hal, when they are planning to get up on purpose to see you off?"

"'Tain't that." Hal began to squirm uneasily, and taking what Molly handed to him, placed it carefully in the little straw-covered suit-case, which had already been packed and repacked with infinite variations as to disposition of its contents some half-dozen times. It was most disagreeable to be thus forced to explain himself.

"What is it, then?" asked Molly.

"Well, I 'spose I'll have to sit on the front seat, an' the fellers'll hate to come right out before 'em. I don't know how I can throw 'em out to 'em, either, so's they won't see. They'd think it was awful funny. Say, Molly, d'you 'spose Little Mama'd sit on the front seat with grandfather? You could ask her. It's just as comfortable even if it ain't so——"

He cast about for a suitable word, but failed to find one, whereat Molly supplied, "Dignified, you mean. Of course it isn't, but she would, just as well as not. But, Hal, why couldn't I sit on the front seat? Little Mama would pretend not to see them and always look somewhere else."

"That'd be all right," acquiesced Hal, "only I'd like better if she wasn't having to pretend."

"Well," returned Molly, dropping involuntarily into the maternal—a rôle which she had unconsciously neg-

lected for a considerable space of time,—“we will arrange all that. Little Mama will understand.” Whereat Hal, giving her a look which was at one and the same time shy and steady and grateful, murmured, “Aw——” He despised his sister when she was maternal, and that in spite of the fact that she was growing undeniably pretty.

But no scheming was necessary the next morning to secure an uncensored trip stationward. During the night the general was awakened by pains in his limbs uncomfortably suggestive of rheumatism, a reminder that the ground surrounding the field where Ludwig had put forth his efforts the day before had been damp. When morning came he felt quite unequal to the early rising that he had planned, and so melancholy was his mood that his wife felt her presence at home a necessity. It was Molly who drove Hal to the station.

As they turned up Bedlam Alley, Hal's lips tightened and his black eyes flashed. The whole occasion was one which required self-possession to an unusual degree. He was conscious of having attained the very pinnacle of celebrity in the eyes of the hoodlums who constituted his loyal band. He felt a just pride in having them witness his departure for the great metropolis, thus alone and minus parting injunctions from solicitous grandparents.

“Hey, there's Mush Davis!” His voice trembled with excitement. “I'm going to give him the ace of hearts, because he's the best of 'em.”

So saying, he selected three of the well-thumbed playing cards from the pack which he held in his hand, among them the ace in question, and as they neared the lad who had popped into view from beneath the bridge, threw them with lavish gesture by the road side. He

spoke no word and gave no other sign of recognition, as became a departing leader scattering largesse to the populace. The happy recipient scrambled for them anxiously, and after examining them minutely placed them in an inside pocket. Again and again the performance was repeated until the carefully assorted cards were exhausted, and a considerable number of small boys had been rendered happy.

The ticket to New York had been purchased the day before, and as there was no trunk to check, there was nothing to do but to await the train.

"I hope you will have a lovely time at Aunt Emma's," said Molly.

"I expect I shall," Hal replied loftily. "Gee! ain't it great to be goin' alone!"

"I'd be afraid," said Molly.

"That's because you're only a girl." Her brother looked at her disdainfully. "What'd you be afraid of?"

"Nothing in particular," Molly answered, and then the smoke of the train appeared in the distance. They did not speak again until the great iron thing had rolled snorting and clanking up beside them, and had come to a halt.

"Good-bye, Hal." She wanted to kiss him, he looked so little to be traveling alone and he was going so far away. A dreadful feeling swept over her as he turned toward the step. Suppose he never came back! For a moment she could see nothing distinctly, but she controlled herself, for Little Mama had warned her particularly against any public display of sentiment. Boys did not like it, she had said.

And then—could she have imagined it?—Molly distinctly heard Hal say, although he had just stepped up

into the car, "Good-bye, Molly," and the voice sounded husky; moreover, it was directly in front of her.

It was Hal; he had come back from the car steps.

Suddenly Molly knew that the same sense of desolation which was making her own eyes sting was causing his lips to quiver. He was just a shy little boy after all, going away from everything that he held dear.

"Good-bye, Hal darling," she said, forgetting all of her grandmother's instructions. "I'll write to you every day."

And for the first time in his life Hal threw both arms around his sister's neck and quite of his own accord kissed her.

"All aboard," shouted the conductor.

Molly drove home slowly. Happiness enveloped her like a cloud. She was conscious of nothing that she passed, but only of Hal's tightly clasped little arms, telling her without words that he loved her in spite of all.

As she neared the gate of Locust Cottage, however, she became aware that a stranger was visiting with her grandparents, a lady who from her general appearance might have been Mrs. Heaton, but was not. Her hair was fair, while Mrs. Heaton's was brown. So much was discernible from the gate.

Molly sat quietly on the front seat of the carriage, waiting for Ludwig, who at her approach stepped out of his room,—in former days the wash-house. She scanned closely the fair-haired visitor, who was smiling and gazing toward the gate.

As the little girl walked toward the house, the lady rose and descended the steps of the veranda, so that

they met in the middle of the path. To Molly, the woman's face seemed the most beautiful that she had ever seen. It was like the faces in the pictures of angels. She was too much surprised at the stranger's evident desire to greet her to think clearly as she came up the path; she had only time to notice that she was crying and smiling at the same time, before she felt herself gathered into her arms.

"Molly, little mother," the woman whispered, "will you share your baby with me? I am his first mother, and I have been hunting for him for two years. He was stolen away from me by his nurse."

"You are Harold's mother?" Molly went white, as she had upon a day nearly two years before when the woman from California had visited the Home. But this time she did not cry.

"Yes," replied the woman.

Molly turned without speaking, and with the stranger's arm still around her shoulders, walked to the porch, her eyes wide and strained, her face working painfully.

"Little Mama," she said, as though she were telling her grandparents what they did not already know, "this lady is Harold's real mother."

"Yes, dear," answered Mrs. Wintringham, "and how happy you must be that you have been able to take her place for so long and at last give him back to her, well and strong."

"I can't be happy, Little Mama," said Molly, still white and quivering, "but he belongs to her, and so——"

She went to her grandmother and stood beside her. The general did not trust himself to speak.

"He belongs not to me alone, Molly," said the

stranger, "but to us both, to you and me. Why you have had him longer than I have! I could not take him away from you. Before I reached Locust Cottage I had decided to build a home here, not far away, in order to be near you. So, you see, Harold will have two mothers instead of one, and you shall see him as often as you wish."

The color streaked up into Molly's face, and she took a deep breath.

"And," went on the lady, "as he has never been christened, I shall name him Harold Hastings von Orth. Will you hold him at the christening and be his godmother?"

"Oh, I should love to!" Molly's face became smiling once more and her eyes sparkled.

Then Mrs. von Orth put her arms around her, and laid her cheek against hers.

"It is wonderful," she said, "how good can come out of what seems so hard to us at the time. I did not know, during those two fearful years when I journeyed from England to Australia, where they told me that Harold's nurse had carried him, and then back to Europe again, that Harold himself was finding a family for himself and me. Perhaps some day I may even be glad. Harold's father died before he was born. Both he and I were only children, and so Harold has neither uncles nor aunts. He has not even grandparents."

"And now he has them all," said Molly. "I am glad already, because I've known for quite a long time that everything bad brings something good."



PART II
**THE WINTRINGHAMS ARE PUT
TO THE TEST**



CHAPTER I

GENERAL WINTRINGHAM'S barn was a delightful place, as delightful in winter as in summer. In truth, it lacked the warm sunniness of the heated season and the smell of new-mown hay, but it made up for this by its compact coziness and its suggestion of midwinter comfort. Pumpkins were ranged along its sides, and winter squashes, and barrels of red-cheeked apples carefully sprinkled with slacked lime, according to the general's invention, and then packed in straw; and there one might hear old Charlie munching his hay, dreaming perchance of pleasant summer days to come, or Suky, the cow, sleepily chewing her cud.

Molly loved the barn, and was apt to take every opportunity for exploring its dark corners in quest of eggs. She had just secured her basketful and stood in the center of the pleasant dimness, taking deep breaths for pure pleasure, when Ludwig, with a queer loose-jointed motion, ascended the steep step and stood before her. He did not seem to have come on any errand other than that of holding converse with her, for he began without any preamble or apology and in the courtly address which he had adopted toward her when she passed her eighteenth birthday.

"How do, Mays Molly." He removed his cap and bowed, his white eyelashes sweeping his exceedingly red cheeks.

"How do you do," answered Molly, looking around quickly in search of an exit. In all her life Molly had never known the meaning of the word "dislike" until now. She could not be said to "dislike" even Mrs. Gordon. Had Mrs. Gordon suddenly reformed in her attitude toward her son, Molly's affections would have rushed out toward her with the same impetus that they rushed toward all the rest of the world,—that is, save Ludwig. She had been sorry for Ludwig and full of sympathy for his artistic efforts. She was ready always to listen to the expression of his aspirations, and did not seem to notice the growing probability of his turning up somewhere in her vicinity whenever she was in the orchard or barn, until Hal, with the propensity of other youths of his age toward teasing their sisters, remarked one day—in quite a casual tone of voice—that her "beau" had painted another masterpiece and was waiting in the kitchen to show it to her. Molly had gone red with mortification and had refused to look at the picture, on the plea of being too busy. For some reason she could not tell her grandmother; the insult was too gross. But she had avoided the man-of-all-work ever since. It made her shiver to look up suddenly and find his little green eyes fixed upon her. She could not have explained her feeling.

"Fayne day," said Ludwig.

"Very fine," acquiesced Molly, turning to the small half-door which led to the cow yard through Suky's stall. Ludwig still occupied his initial position in the main entrance, effectually blocking it; he shifted from post to post, striving meanwhile to make himself agreeable.

"I paynten anodder paycter," he said; "I paynten you, Mays Molly."

Molly halted in her escape, her cheeks as scarlet as when Hal had called Ludwig her beau.

"That is very nice," she said, looking over his shoulder and striving to speak genially. At that moment Hal strolled past the door, with his hands in his pockets. As his eyes met those of his sister, he smiled wickedly. Instantly Molly wheeled and started for the main door, the Swede's lank body making way automatically for her flying figure. "Hal," she whispered stridently, as she passed him, "you are mean, mean, mean!"

"What have I done?" he inquired innocently, walking with an exasperating swagger and laughing at her perturbation from out the corners of his black eyes. The rest of his face was sober.

Molly vouchsafed him no answer.

"Little Mama," she burst through the kitchen door, "I simply cannot stand Ludwig. I know that he is not to blame, poor ignorant fellow, but he gives me the most disagreeable feelings if even I have to look at him. And I wish that he wouldn't smile every moment; it looks so silly. He is just like the Cheshire cat."

Molly flung her cape over a chair and carried the eggs to the pantry. "He is painting a picture of me, he says. Suppose he should ask me to sit for him. You surely don't think that I ought to do that? I simply couldn't. If he could really paint it would be a different matter. And, Little Mama, Hal is a perfect scamp. I saw him talking to Ludwig when I was in the barn, and the next moment Ludwig came in. I believe he told him that I was there. He knows that it plagues me to have to talk to him."

She tossed back a lock of soft dusky hair that had

strayed down over one temple. Walter Hamilton had once likened Molly's hair to that of Henner's "Judith," it was so fine and silky and impalpable. She wore it twisted and coiled around her head in the way in which the other girls wore their braids, and once in a great while, to please Walter, she allowed one curl to hang down over her shoulder.

"I would not give him a second thought, darling, if I were you," Mrs. Wintringham replied evenly, as she gathered upon a tray the tumblers which she had been polishing. "The poor fellow is not entirely responsible, you know. His devotion to you is very touching. Perhaps he has sisters at home in Sweden. Have you ever stopped to think what his life must be, in a strange land and among an alien people? He has made no friends in the town, and is entirely dependent upon us for his home life."

Molly bit her lips and looked away from her grandmother. She could not bear to repeat—even to her—Hal's remark of a few days ago. The very thought of it was an offense. Instead she replied:

"But Ellen is good to him, Little Mama. Ever since he showed her that atrocious painting four years ago, she has prostrated herself before him. You couldn't make her believe that he won't be 'the best av 'em all' some day. She never scolds at him any more, and gives him all the potatoes he can eat. People ought to learn to take pleasure in associates of their own class and not reach out to those who are above them. Of course, I admire Walter for the interest which he has taken in him; his work certainly does begin to show some slight improvement,—it has shadows at least, and he doesn't match his paint to the grass itself, as he did. But on the whole it hasn't made Lud-

wig a bit happier. He begins to look down on his position, and has developed absurd notions about becoming an artist like 'Meester Hamilton.' "

"My dear child, you astonish me. You have always shown so much interest in Ludwig's efforts. What has caused you to change?" Mrs. Wintringham's voice betrayed her surprise.

"Perhaps because he has tired me," replied her granddaughter.

Molly and her grandmother were taking Ellen's place in the kitchen, Ellen herself having succumbed temporarily to her rheumatism. She was resting in bed amid flannels and hot-water bags, a comforting soapstone at her feet. Neither of them would have chosen this work as their vocation, but coming as it did in the way of an avocation once in many moons, it was almost as good as having the general go to New York.

General Wintringham had no very clear idea as to the time that it took to accomplish those duties upon which the happiness and harmony of the household rested, and for that reason seldom intruded upon the feminine portion of his family when engaged in performing them, beyond coming perhaps once during the day to the door of the kitchen, and saying, "How unfortunate that you are forced to be thus employed!" or, "Must you remain here much longer?" To which Mrs. Wintringham would reply:

"Not very much longer, Henry," whereupon he would retire to his study and to his writing.

"And I should not care," continued Mrs. Wintringham gently to Molly, "to have your dear grandfather hear you indulge in such sentiments. That aspiration toward higher things which you decry is what

has made our country what it is to-day. Without it there would be no growth."

"Now, Little Mama, dearest dear! You know that no one draws the social lines more carefully than grandfather does, whether he admits it or not. Why have I never been allowed to go to the assembly dances? They are perfectly proper and always chaperoned. I heard grandfather say one day that the people I would meet there were not 'our kind,' and I would find it quite a different matter to come into contact with them socially. He means to be democratic, but he is just about as democratic as—as—a Turkish monarch. And you are not democratic either, nor is Hal. I love you best just as you are, though, even if I cannot be that way. I'm just the reverse. I have no end of aristocratic sentiments, but when you really come down to it, I'm the only democrat in the family."

Molly wound up her harangue by sinking to her knees beside her small grandmother and laying her cheek against hers. "Couldn't we read?" she asked. "Grandfather is so deep in his essay that he has forgotten our existence. If he does not call you, we can have nearly two hours all to ourselves, and that ought to finish the book."

"It will be an excellent time to read," said Mrs. Wintringham. She drew the large kitchen rocker up before the range, while Molly secured the book, which happened to be "Romola," and a small rocker from the dining-room. She placed it beside her grandmother's.

"I'd love to be an aristocrat," she said, "truly I would, but do you know, since Gertrude's and my lessons in her dear little kitchen, I've grown to love the

smell of meat cooking, and to stick straws into cake, and to beat up eggs and roll pies. I don't know but that I'll hire out to service, and then you and grandfather will treat me with courteous aloofness, won't you, dearest?"

Mrs. Wintringham smiled and stroked back Molly's hair as she had been wont to do when she was a little girl. She was in her nineteenth year now, tall and lithe and buoyant with health.

"What a worldly-wise little woman you are." Her grandmother spoke wistfully.

Molly rose to her feet and stretched out her round white arms with a graceful movement, suggestive of youthful vitality. She was wearing a short-sleeved dress of dark blue gingham as best suiting her occupation.

"Oh, how I love winter!" She crossed to the window and rested her elbow on the top of the sash. "There's a darling black-and-white woodpecker working away at the walnut tree. Poor birdie! What do you suppose he can find? Everything must be quite frozen up. And here comes Ricky. I believe that he saw me in the window. He makes the dearest little tracks in the snow."

She reached for a basket of hickory nuts that hung on a nail beside the door, and stepping out upon the porch, flung him a handful. Ricky was a large gray squirrel with a quite magnificent tail. He was accustomed to clambering upon her shoulder and securing the nuts one by one from her fingers. He could scarcely credit the evidence of his eyes when so many came sailing through the air at once, but sat quite still on his haunches, quirking his tail and watching his mistress from out his bright eyes.

Molly, however, had no time for squirrels upon this blessed feast day when she had her grandmother all to herself. She must enjoy every moment to the uttermost, so she resolutely shut the door on squirrels and birds and the glistening white world without.

"Before we begin to read," she said, "I'll run upstairs and see whether Ellen is perfectly comfortable, and whether she needs anything."

She returned in a moment with the news that Ellen was asleep. She had been careful to make no noise which would disturb her grandfather and cause him to forget his treatise on "Thought Transference."

"Let's put our feet on the oven ledge," she said. "Don't let's miss a bit of it. How can any one speak disparagingly of a kitchen? It is such fun to hear the kettle sing. Doesn't it make a cozy sound?"

Mrs. Wintringham opened the book. They had been reading it for months, since they were able to snatch only a few moments together each day, and Molly refused to read so much as one word to herself. She enjoyed everything threefold, so she was wont to aver, when associated with the sound of her grandmother's voice.

"When is Walter coming for you, dear?"

As she spoke Mrs. Wintringham searched the young face for signs of self-consciousness, but there were none.

"He 'phoned that he would be here exactly at five," returned Molly happily. "The moon rises early; we shall have dinner at the Beeches. I think that I shall wear my crimson cashmere, 'because he likes to see me in it, and it is so warm. It was so queer that he didn't stop to say good-bye to me yesterday, after he had such a long visit with grandfather. I suppose grand-

father told him all sorts of stories about when he was young."

She settled herself to listen.

"Walter is very good to you, dear," said Mrs. Wintringham.

"Yes," she answered absently. "Where did we stop reading last time?"

Mrs. Wintringham opened the book with a sigh.

The great clock in the library was just chiming the hour when the tall-backed roomy sleigh piled high with furs and drawn by two splendid black horses, Walter's own special property, drew up before the gate of Locust Cottage. Molly stood watching for him at the window, and was at the door before he reached it.

"Come in," she said, "and get all nice and toasty over the register while I make ready. Why, you've brought in the robes, haven't you?"

His arms were piled with something soft and furry, but on closer inspection it proved to be not the robes, but a long gray fur coat, and a hood and fur-lined sleighing boots. Molly had a muff of her own.

"My sister sent them to you," he said; "she was determined that you should not take cold."

He dropped them upon the settle in the front hall.

"How sweet of her! Look, Little Mama, what Walter has brought me to wear. Now you needn't worry the least bit." Molly seated herself upon the settle, and Walter, after greeting her grandmother, took up the soft shoes and drew them over Molly's walking boots.

"These are not the delicate overshoes made for evening wear, as you can see," he said. "They go on

over one's everyday heavy footwear, and are very warm. I brought them from Russia long ago. I shall remember to buy you a pair next summer, for I am going abroad to remain at least a year, and part of the time I shall spend there." As he spoke he glanced up searchingly into the sweet, glowing face that bent over him, but it was Mrs. Wintringham and not Molly who caught her breath. Molly did not encounter the glance at all; she was surveying critically the hood, which she turned over and over in her hands.

"Are you, Walter?" she answered. "We shall miss you dreadfully, won't we, Little Mama? But I envy you just the same. How I should love to go! Perhaps I may some day, but it's next best to have one's friends go and bring home lovely paintings of the scenes which they enjoyed and gifts."

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Wintringham.

"I know that I sound 'piggy'!" Molly smiled enchantingly, "but then I really do enjoy gifts so much more than my other possessions."

"That is part of the pleasure in giving them," said Walter.

Then the general appeared. He had not changed perceptibly during the past four years. He was able to endure a trifle less, perchance, spent more of his time at his desk and less in the field superintending Ludwig's efforts to raise crops, and grew daily more dependent upon his wife's society, but there was no vestige of deterioration in his appearance. Mrs. Wintringham, on the other hand, was unimpaired in vigor, but looked frailer, more ethereal. She had never done manual labor of any kind, but her unfailing attendance upon her husband, her constant response to his thought, her readiness to read aloud or be read to, according

to his mood, constituted a nervous strain which most women with many times her capacity for actual labor would have found it difficult to endure.

Both the general and his wife had fallen into the habit of waiting until Walter's first greetings were over before appearing on the scene, and Molly, without ever having discovered the premeditation involved in their tardiness, which as a matter of fact they concealed even from each other, was usually waiting for him at the door, a custom which she had instituted during the first years of their acquaintance.

It was a perfect day for sleighing. The mercury had risen to almost but not quite the melting point, and the keen north wind had ceased to blow. Molly loved nothing better than to whiz along over the smooth white surface, behind the fleet black horses, which were the most beautiful to be found anywhere for miles around. And they were as gentle as her own Persian Rex. She used to go with Walter to the stables every week, to feed them sugar and to admire the beautifully sanded floor beneath the carriages. The motion of the swiftly moving sleigh, the crisp purity of the air which she breathed, the jingling of the bells,—all delighted her; as did the passing of other sleighing parties, with whom there was usually exchanged some word of friendly greeting, for Mr. Hamilton, the distinguished artist who did Hambletown the honor of making it his home, was widely known and admired.

Her companion was unusually quiet during the early part of the drive, and that dampened just a bit Molly's overflowing spirits and kept her speculating as to the reason.

When they had ridden perhaps half an hour, they turned into one of the side roads which she loved, run-

ning between giant maples, and elms, and oaks, whose black branches were covered by an icy coat, which glistened in the winter sunlight as though encrusted with precious gems. Pine trees, too, were there, laden deep with snow and looking as though but waiting the lighting of the candles and the coming of Kris Kringle. Here Walter slowed the horses to a walk.

"Molly," he said, as though not quite knowing how to pave the way for what he most desired to say to her, "do I seem very old to you?"

"Old!" She flashed an astonished smile at him, and then burst into a cascade of laughter. "What an idea. Old—why of course not! What made you ask me such a silly question? You were never so young looking. Little Mama spoke of it only the other day. Now don't you dare think such things. Anyway, a man is as young as he feels, you know; so it will be your own fault if you get notions about being old!"

Walter drew a long breath, as though her assurance brought him relief.

"What made you ask such a thing?"

"I've something to tell you, Molly," he said, "something that will surprise you, but I've thought of it for a long time—over a year, in fact. He was striving to speak quite calmly, but the moment for the wrecking of his self-imposed restraint had come. As he looked down into her clear eyes, he became aware of a sudden melting, as it were, of the very fiber which composed him. He forgot that they were in a sleigh upon a public road, forgot that Molly was scarcely more than a child and might easily be frightened at the expression of an emotion whose strength she could in no wise comprehend,—forgot all else in the world save that the woman whom he loved was beside him.

"Molly," he breathed, "little Molly, I love you. I have loved you always—I want you to be my wife."

Molly gazed into his face, which seemed rather the face of another man, with wide, uncomprehending eyes. For a moment she seemed not to grasp what he had said. It seemed as though it could not be, that her ears must have deceived her.

Then the meaning of it all swept over her. She raised her eyes again to his, and her lips trembled. She could not bear to see him suffer so, and what but suffering could cause his eyes to burn so strangely into hers? She would have made reply—but, as suddenly and unpremeditatedly as he had spoken, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

CHAPTER II

I FEEL as though I had died, Little Mama, and as though now I were some one else. I never dreamed that it could hurt so. It was such a surprise. Walter asked me years ago to feel toward him as though he were my big brother, or my uncle, or my father, and I really do feel that way, though he isn't nearly old enough to be my father. I can scarcely realize it yet."

Mrs. Wintringham sat on the foot of Molly's bed, while Molly herself, clad in her red crêpe kimona, was kneeling before her, looking up into her face with beseeching eyes. Both of her grandparents had been awaiting her in the library, when she had returned from her sleigh ride, somewhere in the neighborhood of half after nine o'clock, but she had gone immediately to her room. She had not remained at the Beeches as long as usual because, fight as she would against it, the solemnity of the experience through which she had just passed checked the ready laugh and tied her tongue. She had felt like a malefactor. Walter had looked so pale, so almost haggard, in spite of his effort to appear normal.

Mrs. Wintringham strove to keep her voice cheerful.

"Many of the happiest marriages in the world have been founded upon such a friendship as that which exists between you and Walter, my dear. Love might easily grow out of it. It is a better basis than the excited imagination upon which young people often mis-

takenly build. What you call the 'great, great love,' dearie, comes as a rule not with the heralding of trumpets and the sound of chariot wheels. It quite as often steals into one's life so silently that one does not know for a long time that it is there. You may find out that what you mistake for friendship is in reality love. I pray that you may. It would make me happy to know that your future were provided for."

"I know it, Little Mama darling, and I am so sorry." Molly lifted her grandmother's slender hands and laid them either side of her cheeks.

"Did my mother have such—such hard times as this?" she queried.

"Yes, just such hard times."

"And did she come to you as I am coming now?"

"Yes, dear, often. Sometimes it is difficult for me to separate you in my mind, now that you are a woman."

"Grandfather will be disappointed, won't he? Marrying me was what Walter wanted to discuss yesterday, wasn't it? Poor grandfather! He looked so happy about it, and you did too, only I never dreamed what they had been talking about. I really can't bear to have you tell him. Walter wanted it to be next summer. He was planning to take us all abroad, and Mrs. Heaton and Gertrude would have gone too. He had everything arranged, and that made it so much harder for him. We would have seen even Russia. That was what he meant about the sleighing boots. Just think of it! And all that happiness depended simply on my decision. I have altered the course of several lives. It seems as though I must be selfish. Only one thing reconciles me, and that is that I won't have to leave Harold. He'd miss me, I know."

She rose to her feet, as the consequences of her decision overwhelmed her, and walked to the window. She pulled up the shade and stood gazing out at the soft moonlit whiteness and the dark dim blue of the star-studded heavens. There was a pathetic droop to her shoulders and to her head.

Molly no longer occupied the little square room in the ell. That had been given to Hal, who now luxuriated in a bedroom and study—den, he preferred to call it—whither he was at liberty to invite such of his boy companions as he admitted to sufficient intimacy. He was still, in a sense, chief of his hoodlum band, but as the passing years brought him and them constantly nearer manhood, a natural divergence in aims and desires had changed their feeling for him to one rather of respectful admiration than of camaraderie. They no longer experienced that avid enjoyment of his society which had drawn them to him as toward a magnet in those days when baseball and leapfrog and marbles had filled the measure of their content. A college banner of bright blue, and bearing the letter Y, hung over his writing table, and with it what concern could the hoodlums have? Around it were grouped various pennants, suggestive of future achievement, and many were the poster advertisements of baseball and football that adorned the walls.

To Molly had been accorded upon her sixteenth birthday, as befitting a young lady whose frocks had recently been lengthened, the second-best guest-chamber, a good-sized, longish room with three windows and a delightful window seat, and,—that which gave her unmitigated satisfaction,—a draped bed and a pier glass.

“Little Mama, Walter asked me whether there was

any one else for whom I cared." She laughed for the first time since "it" had happened. The question appealed to her as distinctly humorous. "I told him that there was not. But how strange of him to ask it! He must know that there are only Hal, my very own brother, and Jack."

Mrs. Wintringham kissed Molly good-night. "Try to put the whole matter out of your mind," she said. "You have not changed the course of any one's life. Do not give it a second thought. You and all of us will go right on leading our lives from day to day just as the Higher Power wills that we should. If I were you I would go to bed and to sleep."

The general was restlessly pacing the library when his wife entered. He turned toward her a face in which happy and unhappy anticipations were curiously mingled.

"Well?" he queried.

"She has refused him."

"Refused him!" The old man sank into his chair, mopping his brow with his crisp white handkerchief, and clearing his throat.

That Molly's decision not to marry the exceedingly eligible suitor who had appeared thus early in her career was a serious matter, could not be denied. In all her life, speaking entirely from a worldly standpoint, she might never again be granted such an opportunity, and it could in no wise have been looked upon as a mere alliance for money. Were Walter Hamilton to be shorn of every one of his well-earned thousands, there was no one that the general and his wife had ever met whom they would so gladly have welcomed as a grandson-in-law. But there was nothing to do, notwithstanding that the general's emotions

were for a moment such that, had they been living some hundreds of years earlier, say in France, where parental and grand-parental authority in matters matrimonial was absolute, Molly's future would have been decided for her without much ado. They were, however, living in a progressive country and the time was the present.

Although General Wintringham's code of honor had excluded the attaching of undue meaning to the young man's very evident affection for his granddaughter,—that is, until the avowal of the preceding afternoon,—he had, without knowing it, harbored a secret hope that some day—— The hope, even in secret, had never focused upon itself the rays of consciousness by proceeding to completion; nevertheless, it was quite sufficient to make itself felt, as the old man realized when it died, leaving in its place the most acute apprehension. What was to become of Molly? Hal would be provided for, but what about her? Evidently, to her wealthy relatives in New York, she was a negligible quantity. Perchance her visit of the winter before had injured rather than augmented her chances.

She had gone to New York for two weeks to Aunt Emma's great house, where expense stared one in the face from each nook and corner, and where lackeys stood at every turn, and where also the owners thereof had attempted to patronize her. These attempts had, however, been frustrated by her own unmistakable beauty, which was of a more vivid kind than that of Clair, by her pretty clothes, nearly all of which she had made herself, and by her own charming naiveté, which had quite captured the young men in her cousin's train.

"Young girls frequently are not aware of their own sentiments," said the general. "I offered myself to you three times before you yielded, if you remember."

"But I meant to consent from the first." Mrs. Wintringham's cheeks became a soft old rose. "In those days a too immediate acquiescence was considered unmaidenly, and of that you were aware. This is different. Henry——"

"What is it, dear?"

"I am afraid that Molly loves, or will grow to love, Jack Gordon."

A brilliant scarlet flared in the general's face and mounted to his forehead.

"She shall not!" he said in a loud and emphatic tone, rising and beginning to pace the library once more. "I will utterly refuse my consent."

He sat down again, as abruptly as he had arisen, his face as nearly belligerent as it had been when he had dealt with Hal on the subject of pistols and cigarettes. His fighting blood was aroused, even as it was then. He had been no idler in time of war, only then he had been sure of his cause. It was a certain lack of sureness in the present instance, and the predominance of his sense of justice, which made him add a moment later, as the blood receded from his face, leaving it its normal pink, "Not that Jack is not one of the finest young men whom I know, earnest and honest and deserving."

"And exceedingly handsome," added Mrs. Wintringham.

"We do not consider a man's appearance," the general spoke oracularly, "in forming an estimate of his character. He is not of our class."

Thus did the old gentleman's reason and justice and

largeness of outlook bow down and do homage before certain inherited prejudices.

"His father——" Mrs. Wintringham ventured faintly, answering the impulse of her generosity and sense of fairness.

"His mother," replied the general emphatically, as she had known that he would; and to this, at the dictate of her own inherited prejudices, she made no reply. Upon this point they were in perfect accord.

"But——" she began a moment later, then thinking it the better part of valor, she changed her observation upon the probability of Jack's manly perfections having some weight with a young lady of nineteen, to—"but what can we do?"

The general had no suggestion to make. He had spoken hastily, forgetful of his own helplessness. Once on a time, like the genii of old, he might have picked up the unconscious damsel and have set her down a thousand miles away, amid a new and compelling environment, and have surrounded her with eager and eligible suitors, among whom she had only to choose; but had such been his power, the need would have vanished, for they would not then have been living in Hambletown, and there would have been no Jack Gordon.

"Aside from other considerations," he said, "Jack has four years of college before him after this year, and then two years at least of hard work before he can earn enough salary upon which to marry. Molly would then be twenty-six. It must not be."

"How can we prevent it?" Mrs. Wintringham spoke tremulously. She sat in her accustomed place on the opposite side of the library table, her hands pressed tightly together. In the sudden clearing of

their vision, the catastrophe for which they had unwittingly paved the way seemed imminent.

"I myself will talk to him," replied the general, with a momentary return of his old confidence.

"But he has never hinted at such a possibility, even remotely, to Molly," she said. "Would it be possible for us to take the initiative?"

"I might mention the fact that no gentleman ever broaches such a subject to a young girl, without first consulting her guardians, with the view to ascertaining whether his suit is looked upon with favor."

The general's voice grew severe. One could imagine him as even then addressing the culprit.

"But may we not be attaching undue importance to what may prove, after all, only a boy-and-girl friendship?"

Mrs. Wintringham's query held in it no ironical reminder of the general's earlier expression of sentiment. Her concern was too real. Their discussion, however, ended where it began, for—Jack's character being what it was, his visits at Locust Cottage having become an accepted fact, and, moreover, he having won for himself the genuine affection of General Wintringham and his wife, who would miss his visits sorely should they be discontinued,—what was to be done? They comforted themselves with the reflection that he was going away to college next year, taking with him his mother. He had made arrangements to attend one of the smaller colleges in a town where self-supporting work could be obtained. Of necessity his mother must accompany him, since she was to be provided for, but aside from this she would not have consented to a separation.

Mrs. Heaton, foreseeing the handicap that the

woman would be to her son, had striven to come to his rescue by offering Mrs. Gordon, much against her own will, a position at the Beeches as housekeeper, but it had been without avail. The woman seemed fearful lest her son, whom her combined forces could not drag down to her own level, should find his ascent too easy, unencumbered by her presence. Perhaps, too, there was beneath her jealousy and resentment the ancient fire of mother-love, which, denied its proper outlet, resembles at times the gnawing flame of hate. He was hers, and tender and forbearing though he might be, each year carried him further away from her, and further into that world out of which his father had stepped when he married her. She was holding him back by the only means within her power, since she was unable to rise and accompany him.

Upon this very winter's evening, in a three-roomed cottage not many rods away, the object of the general's concern sat by the kitchen table beside an oil lamp, vainly attempting to study. His elbows rested on the table and his chin was buried in his palms. He had bought certain of the books required for freshman work in the college which he anticipated attending, and was bent upon mastering two at least of the subjects, in the hope of being allowed to substitute two sophomore subjects in their places. By devoting a portion of his summer vacations to study, he might easily complete the college course in three years.

"A fine gentleman you are, ain't you, to sit and gawk over books while your mother looks at the side of the wall for company, and after slaving all the day, so that you can visit with the swells."

"Mother, we have discussed all this hundreds of

times; can't we let the matter drop? You know—and no one knows better than you—that it is my wish that you should give up earning money. I am perfectly able to support you and I am glad to do it."

Jack spoke wearily and returned to his book, but the toneless voice continued:

"I suppose you think you are going to marry Molly Hastings, don't you? That's what all these fine airs mean." She laughed with unpleasant mirth and her face took on an expression of mean satisfaction. "I saw Mr. Hamilton kiss her to-day, an' more'n once, too, when he thought no one was lookin'. They was out in the sleigh together, with the black horses, an' the horses was walkin'. Humph! And you moonin' after her like a lovesick cat!"

"Mother!"

Mrs. Gordon laughed acidly and returned to her darning, which, curiously enough, was one of her son's socks, into which she was putting her most careful work. Jack was a man now. Already he had cast his first vote, assuming thereby a man's responsibilities toward his country. He stood six feet without his shoes, and could have had his pick of the girls for miles around. She was proud of him and she feared him with the secret fear that always hides in the heart of a shrew. She never goaded him beyond a certain point, the point signalized by the tone in which he had just addressed her. He rose and towered above her.

"Did you, with your own eyes, see Mr. Hamilton kiss Miss Hastings?"

The woman cackled shrilly, but made no reply.

"Mother, you are lying!" Jack's face had gone white and his eyes seemed to contract.

"Lying is it!" The angry color darted up into Mrs.

Gordon's gaunt cheeks. "So I'm lying, am I?" She rose and confronted him. "You whelp of an impostor!—may you go the way your father went! You viper! No, I am not lying, and others as was with me saw it, two aside me. Ef she ain't goin' to marry him she'd orter, for she ain't none too good. They was drivin' through John Penny's woods. There now, you've got your fill. Swally it the best ye can, ye fool!"

She lapsed further and further into her native bad grammar as her abuse reached its climax; when she had done she sank trembling into her chair, her thin nostrils quivering. Jack continued to gaze at her speechlessly for a full minute, then seizing his cap and his greatcoat from the nail above his head, he stamped noisily from the room, slamming the door with unaccustomed display of anger. A moment later he opened it with a sternness and determination in his face which she had never seen there before, and said:

"If you ever again mention Miss Hastings' name to me, or to any one else in any other tone than that of respect, I will leave you."

He stepped out again into the night, without waiting for a reply. He wanted space and quiet in which to think. With all her faults, his mother was not a liar, that he knew; rather, the reverse. She was wont to overstep the bounds set for the righteous telling of truth. She told too much truth, so much that it became an offense no less than her manner of telling it. Why had Walter Hamilton kissed Molly? What reason could there be for it, save that he had asked her to become his wife?

Sufficient friendship existed between the two men, the old and the younger, to exclude from Jack's mind

the possibility of any want of respect on Walter's part, any holding of Molly lightly. He must be in love with her. The blood surged up into his head, swelling out the veins on either side of his neck, and throbbed in his temples. He stumbled along blindly over the oft-trodden road, his eyes hot and stinging, and finally took up his position in the shade of one of the great pine trees which lined the path in front of Locust Cottage. He seemed alone in a world which had grown suddenly empty of all else. Without Molly, what was there for him? He was there when she drew aside the curtain and raised the shade, and stood looking out into the white mystery of the moonlight, which to him seemed utterly black. He stretched his arms out to her, in the grief and abandon of his hurt young love.

Until now she had been like a pillar of fire, going on before, or as the far-distant shrine toward which he had begun his pilgrimage. He had not realized until to-night that she was not a creature of the future, but vitally of the present, already a woman with her own life to live, a being entirely distinct from himself.

He had grown accustomed to the fatherly interest which Walter Hamilton had always shown for her, had lost that first antagonism which as a boy in his teens he had felt toward him, had come to look upon the difference in their ages as an insurmountable barrier. He laughed bitterly at the thought of his own folly, but as he laughed new decision filled him. He was a man, even as Walter Hamilton was a man, and he should not allow himself to be balked as easily as that. He was her friend and comrade, and, God willing, her lover. He had an inalienable right to know the meaning of that kiss. He had proved himself the equal of other men of his age in a hundred ways. He would

become, in time, educated, even as Walter Hamilton was educated; and when he was done, he would carve out a career, even as had he, with only his own brain and his own bare hands to depend upon. He meant to enter the arena of business. Where his father had failed, he was determined to succeed. He would go to the general and find out whether Molly was already affianced, and whether it was permitted him to hope. That was the accepted method of settling such difficult questions in the world to which she belonged. It was his world as well.

CHAPTER III

MOLLY was very unhappy after her grandmother left her, and unhappiness sat as drearily upon her as it would have upon some cheerful little robin. She lay awake for a long time. She heard the great clock in the library chime all the quarters until far into the morning before she fell asleep. At eight o'clock Mrs. Wintringham entered her room noiselessly, and lowered the shades. There were circles around Molly's eyes, which told as plainly as could words the tale of her wakefulness. Her grandmother stood looking at her anxiously, and a wistfulness came into her expression as she gazed at the perfect oval of the sleeping face, the pure whiteness of the skin, the length of the heavy curling lashes. She wondered helplessly what was to be the outcome, for her, of her decision of the night before.

"I think that I will remain from church this morning, Henry," she said, as she joined her husband and Hal in the dining-room, where they were already seated at the table. "I want Molly to sleep as long as possible, and I prefer to be here when she awakes."

"Is she sick?" Hal's voice expressed amazement tinged with anxiety. He had become her devoted admirer, albeit he enjoyed teasing her, especially about Ludwig.

"No," answered her grandmother, "not really ill, but she was slightly indisposed last night and did not sleep well."

"An excellent plan," acquiesced the general. "Hal and I will do our best to represent the family." He had not yet given up hope that, at the eleventh hour, Molly might change her mind as had her grandmother before her. The peculiarities of the feminine constitution are, so he reasoned to himself, not so very different to-day from what they were fifty years ago, and his wife's influence at a critical moment was by no means a negligible quantity.

Walter Hamilton also had passed a restless night, and, arising early, had intimated his determination to go to New York at once, for his own sake as well as Molly's, since his presence at the Beeches could not but be an embarrassment to her. Mrs. Heaton accompanied him to the station. As they passed the corner below the church they saw the general on his way to service unescorted by any member of his family. His was a figure which could be mistaken nowhere. The absence of Hal and of Molly was not significant, since they both attended Sunday school; but that of Mrs. Wintringham could mean only that for some reason she was at home. Evidently she was not ill, or the general would not have left her side.

When Mrs. Wintringham, glancing up from the church paper which she was reading (she was sitting in the dining-room, where she might hear the first movement overhead), saw standing before the gate Mrs. Heaton's brougham—set for the winter upon runners,—from which was descending that lady herself, she experienced a sudden lifting of her anxiety, which amounted almost to presentiment. She realized that, of the people whom she knew, there had come to her in her perplexity the one of all others whom she most desired to see. She was at the front door before Mrs.

Heaton had reached the porch, and opened it softly, saying as she did so, "Molly is asleep."

"Poor childie!" Mrs. Heaton answered in a whisper. "Walter had a bad night, too. He has gone to New York."

Mrs. Wintringham led the way to the library and closed the door, that the murmur of their voices might not be carried upstairs. Neither she nor her guest indulged in preliminaries of any nature. Now that the barrier to frankness had been removed, preliminaries were not necessary. Mrs. Heaton looked so young and vital and beautiful that the older woman turned to her instinctively.

"It is not," she said, after the most obvious phase of the matter, Walter's disappointment and Molly's evident unhappiness at being the instrument thereof, had been discussed, and the possible danger to her lurking in her friendship for Jack Gordon had been broached, "that we have any objection to the boy himself. It is not that. On the contrary, he is very dear to us. But you and I, as women of experience, know what the wife of a poor man would have to face, encumbered as he is by his mother. Were she even of a different type, the outlook would not be so appalling. Of course, we are anticipating matters, but in an affair of this kind anticipation is necessary. Her grandfather and I are strongly of the opinion that Molly could not have refused to marry Walter unless, consciously or unconsciously, she had already given her heart to another. We have been most indiscreet in allowing her such close companionship with Jack," I fear.

"There is only one way," replied Mrs. Heaton, "in which a catastrophe may be avoided, and that is by

separating them. Molly should be meeting other men."

"Exactly," returned Mrs. Wintringham, the fine lines between her eyes deepening, "but that is precisely what we cannot accomplish." She spoke unconsciously, no dawning of Mrs. Heaton's plan of separation having come to her. The mere sharing with her of her anxiety was a relief.

Then her guest, with her own inimitable tact, outlined to her a method of escape for Molly from what seemed to be the ever-lessening coils of an untoward fate. She herself would take her abroad, before the time of Jack's departure for college. For a few moments Mrs. Wintringham sat in stunned silence. Locust Cottage without Molly was unthinkable, and yet it seemed a direct answer to prayer, in fact, the only answer.

"I know how hard the thought of parting with her is," said Mrs. Heaton, sympathetically; "but the need is great, and, as you know, she would be quite safe with me."

"Dear Mrs. Heaton," Mrs. Wintringham's eyes suffused with tears, "I am sure that my husband will feel as I do, that your offer is providential. Molly has my consent to go already. I will talk the matter over with him upon his return from church."

Mrs. Heaton's expression became relieved.

"You must not look upon my invitation, Mrs. Wintringham," she said, "as a favor done you. What favor there is, is entirely upon your side. It has been my desire for several winters to take Molly to Europe with me, but I have hesitated to ask you because of the desolation which it would leave here. Now, however, it seems inevitable. Yet I want you to promise me

that when school closes you and the general and Hal will join our party as my guests. Walter will go to England early in July, and would be delighted to be your escort. A summer abroad before entering college would be of benefit to Hal, and place him more on an equality, as to experience, with his cousin."

Mrs. Heaton waited anxiously for Mrs. Wintringham's answer. As a matter of course, were Molly to marry Walter during the coming summer, a family party, including the general and his wife and Hal, would have been quite in order. This was different. But Mrs. Wintringham, after her first surprise, accepted the invitation for consideration as she would have accepted an invitation to tea. The general had once taken a party consisting of themselves and four guests on a tour around the world. She saw nothing that savored of charity in the arrangement; she saw only the kindness which had inspired it.

In spite of his decision to approach General Wintringham at the earliest opportunity, with a view to ascertaining in what light the old gentleman would regard what might easily be looked upon as presumption, Jack Gordon had no intention of hastening matters. He was possessed of sufficient reticence, coupled with a power of exact reasoning, to make him consider carefully any proposed step, especially were it to be taken, of necessity, in the dark. He was entirely aware that the bare mention of his desires would, should they prove unpleasant to the general, raise a permanent barrier between himself and Molly.

Jack had not returned to his home the night before until he felt sure that his mother had gone to bed. In all the days of his boyhood she had never angered him as she had a few hours earlier by her coarse

allusions to what she had seen in John Penny's woods. He felt that he could not endure looking at her again that day. But when he reached the cottage a light shone under the door, and when he opened it, he came upon her, sitting in the same position in which he had left her, although her darning was finished. When he entered she rose without speaking, and went to her room.

On Sunday morning Jack was up early, long before his mother awoke. He moved about softly, in order not to arouse her, and prepared for himself a light breakfast. After that he made a few sandwiches, which he carried with him for luncheon, and then started out on an all-day tramp through the woods and over the hills, his snowshoes slung from his shoulder. They would help him over difficult places. He had no desire to attend church, for there was that hot within his heart which made him shun the society of his fellows. His mother's words rankled, try as he would to explain them away. As a matter of course, either Molly and Walter Hamilton had become engaged, or else a trick of vision, some sudden movement perchance on Mr. Hamilton's part, had been misinterpreted by his mother. So he walked and reasoned as he walked, pondering upon the advisability of calling upon the general that very week, if he could but catch him alone.

Meanwhile the bell in the tower of the Assembly Hall tolled twelve,—the hour when the good people would start on their way home from church. Mrs. Heaton had not remained until the general's return, being desirous of meeting Mlle. René, the governess, and Gertrude at the close of service. They would be waiting for her in the lobby of the church.

When she had gone Mrs. Wintringham went into the kitchen for a glass of milk to carry to Molly, whom she heard stirring about in the room overhead. She found Ludwig bending laboriously above the kitchen table, holding between protesting fingers a scratchy pen, while nearby sat Ellen, her elbows on the table, in her hands a small pocket dictionary, once the property of Hal, which she was endeavoring unsuccessfully to interrogate on Ludwig's behalf. Ludwig, it seemed, was writing a letter in English.

"Can I help you?" Mrs. Wintringham halted beside him. "What is it that you want to say?"

He flushed even more ardently than before and dropped his eyelids, but made no answer.

"He's writin' a letter to his swateheart, that he be," said Ellen, winking slyly. "He asked me how to spell love. An' he's the cute one fer ye!"

Mrs. Wintringham looked sympathetic. Poor fellow, she thought, perhaps after all he had succeeded in finding some girl to smile upon his loneliness. Immediately her mind leaped to possibilities of service. Mrs. Gordon would not be there another year. A wife might do washing and assist Ellen with the cleaning. The old wash-house, which Ludwig occupied, was really quite commodious.

"What you say to begin wit?" inquired Ludwig, glancing up sheepishly.

"Dear Friend?" suggested Mrs. Wintringham.

"No," replied Ludwig. "Dat not goot 'nuff."

"Esteemed Lady?" offered his mistress hopefully.

"Dat all right. How you spell it?" Ludwig bent over the table laboriously, while Mrs. Wintringham slowly gave him the letters, looking kindly at the pitifully unattractive man.

"Is there anything else which you would like to know?"

"How you mek fine end?" he inquired, with a trifle more assurance.

Mrs. Wintringham smiled a little.

"Your faithful and obedient servant," she offered.

"No servant," objected Ludwig.

"Admirer?"

"How you spell it?" asked the man, bending again to his task. "Dat goot."

Mrs. Wintringham again named the letters, while he scratched heavily with his pen, and then she moved up the stairs slowly, laughing to herself. "Poor Ludwig!"

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS afternoon before Mrs. Wintringham found opportunity of disclosing to her husband the campaign of relief instituted by Mrs. Heaton. Molly, very much refreshed by her long sleep, and much more like her normal self, save for an added gravity, set out immediately after dinner for Eleanor Mitchell's abode. Eleanor had invited her to go on a tramp with her. Her grandmother was only too glad that the afternoon had been thus pleasantly provided for, since fresh air and exercise would serve better than anything else to drive away morbid self-communings. She did not inform her of Walter's return to New York, nor of Mrs. Heaton's morning call.

General Wintringham received the intelligence which his wife had so carefully reserved for his ear with his customary dignified lack of self-consciousness, no thought of the expense involved in the undertaking entering his mind.

"Nothing could so well suit the occasion," he said, when she had done. "The child seems under an especial protection. I could wish for her nothing better than that now, while she is at an impressionable age, she should enjoy the advantages of foreign travel with so accomplished a companion as Mrs. Heaton. Have you ever stopped to consider, my dear, how very wonderful are the ways of Providence? And as a matter of course, this plan will effectually solve the vexing

question of her possible attachment to Jack Gordon. It is doubtful whether there is any immediate danger. Such danger would not be apt to arise until the time for separation approaches. I must confess, however, to feeling a bit doubtful as to the wisdom of our accompanying the party. Travel at our time of life is a serious consideration. What do you say, my dear?"

"I would gladly become a member of it, Henry, that is, if you feel equal to the undertaking. I have never recovered from my delight in 'going somewhere.' I still take the greatest pleasure in hearing the bells ring, and the whistles blow, and in feeling the thrill of the machinery as it ushers in the beginning of a pilgrimage."

"Blessed are the young!" The general gazed affectionately at his wife, whose eyes were shining with anticipation. "I believe that your heart is no older than Molly's. We will go—by all means. And, moreover, aside from our personal feelings, we should strive to remember that Mrs. Heaton would be grievously disappointed were we to refuse."

In spite, however, of the fact that the general's acceptance of Mrs. Heaton's invitation was based upon motives of kindly concern for her, a certain change in his appearance and bearing became more and more noticeable as the afternoon wore on. Long forgotten incidents connected with past voyages began to crowd his memory. Again and again he referred to experiences in London, which had always been his favorite city, loyal American though he might be, and to experiences as well in various parts of the globe,—experiences which he planned to renew.

At five o'clock Molly returned, glowing from her walk and pleasant companionship.

"Little Mama," she exclaimed, the moment that she was within the door, "Eleanor is going to start a private German class for just herself and Jack and me. Isn't that glorious! We will go right on reading where we left off in school. I met Jack as I came out of Eleanor's and we walked home together. I told him about it. We are going to meet on Wednesday evenings."

"Will Jack be able to continue his evenings here?" inquired her grandfather with unusual solicitude. "Will it not take too much time from his studies?"

"Oh, yes, he can come just the same. We thought of all that. He will bring his rhetoric with him, and we will read aloud and discuss some of the literature which the freshman course requires as collateral. That will really be a help to me, you see. Jack is getting way ahead of me already." She laughed contentedly. "If we can get enough German read, he could skip right into third-year German. Already he has enough to pass the first year's work. He has a perfectly wonderful mind, hasn't he? Won't we be proud of him when he graduates from college! We were talking about it on the way from Eleanor's, but somehow he didn't seem a bit happy. He had been tramping through the woods and back roads ever since early morning. Perhaps his mother has had one of her fits of bad temper. All he can do at such times is to get out of the house."

During this long speech Molly's grandparents eyed each other with furtive apprehension, thinking each the selfsame thoughts, thoughts bearing not so much on the wonder of Jack Gordon's mind as on the wonder of their granddaughter's mind. How was it possible that at nineteen she had kept entirely a child?

One would think that after so recent an experience with one man she would by a simple act of transference become aware of potentialities where another was concerned. What the awakening would be, should Jack change his own attitude,—a thing which might happen at any moment,—they trembled to think. Molly was now to pass two evenings a week regularly in his society, in addition to which there would be many chance meetings, like that of to-day. The voyage to Europe was some two or three months distant.

"My dear," the general said emphatically, when Molly, having expended her budget of news and of renewed good spirits, had retired to her own room, "I must find a way to have a serious conversation with Jack. An unguarded word from him might easily shatter our child's future, and render useless the great kindness of Mrs. Heaton. Were this to happen, it would be nothing short of tragedy. I think that I will send for the boy and speak frankly with him, as man to man. He will, I am sure, understand our position, and if we should be proved to be laboring under a delusion, why, then, no possible harm will have been done. It is, I fear, the only way in which we may purchase safety for Molly and peace for our own minds."

The old man sighed, for after all he was an old man. The years of life which stretched out before him could not, in the very nature of the case, be many, and who then would there be to take care of Molly?

It did not, however, become necessary for him to send for Jack for the purpose of conversing privately with him. It was Jack himself who sought the interview. He called for Molly on Wednesday, as had been agreed upon, but on the way to Eleanor's in-

formed her that, upon this initial night, he would not be able to attend the class. A business matter had arisen, he explained, which required his time. She was disappointed, very much so; but he was often called upon to do some especial work for Mr. Sawyer after the regular hours, for which work his employer always gave him extra pay, and so she spent no time in speculating upon the cause of his defection, but promised to read with him upon Friday evening all that the class should read to-night.

Jack did not wait to speak to his hostess. The moments were precious. He had promised to call for Molly at nine o'clock, and it was considerably after seven now. It would be half after seven before he could reach Locust Cottage, which left scant time for the interview,—opportunity for which had so miraculously arisen,—and for the “in all probability necessary” pulling of himself together afterwards. As the moment drew near, he felt less and less confidence in his cause, and when he was ushered for a second time that evening into the presence of General and Mrs. Wintringham, his face told its own story to their practiced eyes, even before he had requested a word in private with his host.

“Why, Jack, back so soon?” The general strove to put him at his ease, which attempt was seconded by his wife, who said, kindly, “Nothing has happened, has there? You saw Molly safely to Miss Mitchell’s, did you not?”

“No, nothing has happened, Mrs. Wintringham,” the young man answered, struggling to gain command of himself. Their very calmness and seeming unpreparedness added to his discomfort. “I have come to have a little talk with your husband—on a matter of

business, if I may." He swallowed painfully over his words, and an uneven color mantled his face.

The general rose at once, but there was in his manner none of the eager courtesy which had been so evident when, a week before under like circumstances, Walter Hamilton had made a similar request. Rather his attitude was one of sympathetic condescension. He felt a very real sorrow for the boy, whom, in the interests of his granddaughter, he was about to wound. It did not occur to him to wonder over the simultaneity of the two interviews, since he was in ignorance of the close connection which existed between them. He was only too glad that this second one had come so immediately, without painful maneuvering upon his own part.

The general led the way to his den, Jack following. When they reached the velvet curtains the general entered first and, taking his accustomed chair, motioned Jack, who had remained standing, to the chair usually occupied by his wife. This arrangement in itself placed the young man at a disadvantage, for the revolving desk chair was high, and the easy chair was low, so that the old man towered overpoweringly above him.

"Now, my boy, how can I serve you?" The voice in which the words were uttered was exceedingly considerate.

For a moment Jack's shyness at the unwonted position in which he found himself overcame him, and then he gathered his forces.

"I love Molly," he said, looking fearlessly into the general's eyes, "and I came to-night to ask you whether there is any reason why I may not hope to win her love,—whether she is pledged to any one else,

or whether she loves any one else. I am too young to think of immediate marriage, and too poor. I should never dream of mentioning the matter to her, until such a time as might seem to you expedient. I should desire her to see the world, and meet other men, for that is the only way in which she can learn her own heart. But, if—if——” Jack choked over the next words, and his bearing became shy again, “if, when I am in a position to offer her a suitable home, she should be willing to become my wife, would such a union have your consent and approval?” He brought his speech to an end. He had spent a large portion of his Sunday walk in planning what he would say, and he had omitted nothing.

As the general's eyes traveled over the strong young face, with its breadth and height of brow, its steady eyes, all alight with first love, its fine quivering nostrils, his heart melted. Was there not here, in embryo, the ideal husband and grandson-in-law? Perchance, too, his acquiescence was due partly to the fact that Jack had said all that he himself had intended to say, and that his dignified and conservative attitude insured Molly's immunity. At all events, he rose and, holding out his hand, set his seal upon the young man's hopes.

“My boy,” he said, “I could wish for nothing better. If when, as you say, you are in a position to marry, Molly desires to become your wife, she, as well as you, shall have my blessing. She is not pledged to any other man, nor has she, to my certain knowledge, consciously given her affection to any other man. In the meantime, remain true to your decision to broach the matter to her neither directly nor indirectly. It would be criminal to engage her affections

either through her sympathies or through an appeal to her loyalty, and you yourself would, in the end, be the sufferer. Let her remain a child as long as possible, and heart-whole, untroubled by the necessity of a choice, for the making of which she will be better fitted some years from now than at present."

The general kept Jack's hand in his while he spoke, and his words were quite audible in the library beyond, —rather, would have been had there been any one there to hear. Mrs. Wintringham, however, had been summoned to the back door soon after Jack's arrival, and was, at the moment of the general's peroration, closeted with Mrs. Dennis in the dining-room, deep in the details of Daisy's approaching wedding, where her husband found her some moments later, having bidden his guest good-bye and Godspeed.

When Mrs. Wintringham finally joined him in the library, he was in the highest good humor at the unexpected and happy turn of events.

"He was splendid, Margaret," he said; "no less than splendid! If he matures as he has begun, he will be a man to be proud of. He showed himself a gentleman in every sense of the word, asking not for a definite promise, but only that he should be allowed to hope. He pledges himself to make no attempt to engage the child's affections in any way, until such time as he shall be in a position to offer her a suitable home. Those were his very words. I should have been less a gentleman than he by far had I refused my consent. In this great and glorious country, my dear, all men are equal, even as they are equal in the sight of God. I gave him my blessing and the assurance of my sympathy. This does not, however, ahem——" the general removed his glasses, "preclude our earnest

endeavors to surround Molly with eligible men of a social rank which would fit them to be suitable husbands. We must take into consideration all phases of the situation."

"I am so glad, Henry." Mrs. Wintringham's face had brightened during her husband's recital. "How much better it was for him to come to you than that you should have gone to him."

Meanwhile Jack had hastened back to the German class, which when he arrived had only commenced its session, there having been a certain amount of conversation to be disposed of before the regular work could begin.

"Well," said Molly, "it didn't take you very long, did it?" She looked up roguishly from the depths of a huge chair.

"Not long," he answered, in a tone whose joyousness was entirely out of proportion to the matter in hand.

"And it must have been very pleasant work, judging from your face," added Eleanor.

"It was," admitted Jack, his content again overflowing into his voice, "and the pay was extra large." He dropped his eyes quickly, for at that moment Molly looked at him. He was afraid lest they should betray his secret.

CHAPTER V

WALTER Hamilton's battle was short and severe, but when it was done it left him the victor. During the early part of the week he denied himself to his friends, spending a portion of his time in furious onslaughts upon his canvas, and the rest in rapid walking through the less-frequented parts of New York. His face became gray and drawn, but before the end of the week Molly received from him a letter that completely restored to her the lightness of heart which had always been hers. He had made a mistake, he said, and assured her that her sensible view of the situation had doubtless saved each one of them unhappiness. She was to think no more of the matter, and their sweet comradeship was to continue unchanged. He wanted her love, just as she had always given it to him, for he felt that he could not get along without it; but he was more than satisfied to have her care for him as she would care for her own father.

Had Molly been older and more versed in the intricacies of the human heart, she would have realized the sublimity of the sacrifice which he was making for her sake; but, as it was, she showed the letter joyously to her grandmother, assuring her that everything was all right now. Walter's life had not been ruined at all, she said, and he was not unhappy any more. He would return to Hambletown in a week or two; he

couldn't have left to get away from her, as she had at first thought, because he said that he had been called there suddenly to execute a large commission. He loved her just the same, and she loved him a thousand times more than she did before. She said all this almost in one breath, and then wrote Walter a note in which she very frankly expressed similar sentiments, after a reading of which he walked the pavements of the great city until morning before he had gained sufficient control of his emotions to sleep.

The week following Walter Hamilton's proposal had been, in a sense, one of upheaval, none the less so that there were no external signs by which to recognize it. Nothing beyond the ordinary daily occurrences had taken place, except perhaps Molly's long Sunday sleep and Mrs. Heaton's unwonted early call. Still, there had followed four days of unrest and anxious foreboding, which state of affairs had been brought to a sudden end by Jack Gordon's frank and manly avowal of his own feelings toward Molly, and the dignified attitude which he had assumed. It is to be feared that in their heartfelt relief and gratitude, her grandparents thought more of her and of her future than of the boy, genuine though their admiration and respect for him might be, and that they unconsciously, perchance, desired nothing so much as that events should so shape themselves as gradually to eliminate him from her life.

There was no longer any necessity for secrecy with regard to the proposed trip abroad, and so Molly was at once initiated into their plans for the coming year. Mrs. Heaton expected to sail in early spring, possibly by the first of May, for the Riviera, taking with her Gertrude and Mlle. René and Molly. Somewhere

near the middle of July they would be joined by General and Mrs. Wintringham and Hal. Walter would be with them now and again, as his route crossed theirs. The period of their stay abroad would be determined by later circumstances. The proposed arrangements were all on so magnificent a scale that Molly could not at first grasp them in their entirety. It was as though Hambletown itself were about to be removed to foreign parts; with so general an exodus it seemed scarcely "going away" at all.

"It is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to us, Little Mama," she said, "isn't it? Why, I've fairly dreamed Europe! I am glad that I have read so much, and I have learned so much from Walter and Eleanor,—but how I wish Mrs. von Orth and Harold and Jack were going, too! Couldn't I suggest it? Think what it would mean to Jack! The mere expense of it, as a matter of course, would not count, and he might be able to earn enough by his usefulness to pay his way. I should think that a man in the party would be really a necessity. He could return with Hal when college opened. And Mrs. von Orth would pay her own way."

"I should scarcely like to suggest such a thing, dearie, if I were you," answered Mrs. Wintringham. "In the first place, people like to make their own plans without interference from the outside, and, in the second place, Jack could not very well leave his mother. He will always have her to provide for. In all probability, he will never be able to live away from her."

Mrs. Wintringham considered this an opportune moment for the forcing home of certain unpalatable truths.

"Why, of course," acquiesced Molly, her eyes grown wide. "He could not very well desert his own mother. I suppose it wouldn't be proper for me to suggest such a thing, only it passed through my mind. Don't you think, Little Mama, that I have improved a good deal about interfering in other people's business? I have certainly tried to, though it is very hard. Sometimes it is only that I want to help."

"Yes, indeed, you have improved, darling, not only in that, but in many ways."

"But Mrs. Heaton is ever so fond of Mrs. von Orth and Harold, and I just know she would love to have them along. She simply hasn't thought of it. Why, we shall start in just about eight weeks. Eight weeks! Europe! Oh, I can't believe that such a thing is really to happen! But I shall miss you and grandfather and Hal terribly; it will be two whole months before we can be together again."

"Two months will fly, when there is so much to see and so much to do, as you will find. You must write long letters home, telling us your impressions of everything. We will keep them carefully, so that when you return they will serve as a diary of your travels."

But Molly was not apt to grieve overmuch in advance. There was too much to be done; so she set herself at once to the preparation of her wardrobe. She would need very little, so Mrs. Heaton assured her, when upon the afternoon of the day on which she heard the glad tidings she discussed the trip for a second time with her at the Beeches. No reference was made by either of them to the affair with Walter. There was no use, so Mrs. Heaton explained, in trav-

eling with a large quantity of clothing when it could be secured so cheaply and easily abroad.

When Molly told Jack Gordon about it his face grew grave, although he congratulated her heartily. Mentally he began to calculate how long it would be before he too could afford to go to Europe. He felt as though the proposed trip would place still another barrier between them, since to lag behind in any experience which made for culture and breadth of view must inevitably cause him to be less worthy of her esteem. He did not dream that the party was planning to remain away longer than the period of a few months. He, as well as Molly, looked forward already to a delightful reunion before college opened, when she would pour out to him all such details of her foreign travels as she had not written. "And you," she said, "must write me all about your studies, and everything."

There was a subtle change discernible in Jack's treatment of Molly these days. There was a new tenderness in his eyes and in his voice, a new shyness as well as assurance in his manner, resulting from his determination to shield her from all knowledge of his love. He weighed carefully everything that he said to her, and turned away his eyes if by any chance he became aware that, in spite of his efforts to the contrary, they had taken matters into their own hands and were pleading his cause for him.

"Look at me," she said to him peremptorily one evening, when they had persistently sought the floor or the ceiling or the walls of the general's study, during the hour which he had spent there.

"I am looking at you," he said, making a desperate effort to control himself.

"What's the matter, Jack?"

"Nothing," he answered, in feigned surprise.

He did not break his word to the general by giving voice to what was in his heart, even though his blood sang through his veins until it seemed as though somewhere near a church organ were pealing.

"Let's go down and make fudge," said Molly. "You may crack the nuts."

"All right." He gave a relieved laugh and rose with alacrity.

He suffered himself to be swathed in a gingham apron, and obediently received upon his knees the yellow earthen bowl. If he felt a desire to seize her cool white hand and lay his cheek against it, he repressed it; and if to her the thick, waving yellow hair seemed as though it would lie the more presentably were slim fingers to be run through it, she gave the matter scarcely more than a passing thought, proceeding at once to the all-important business of cutting chocolate and measuring sugar.

Just before Jack took his departure, and as they were piling the brown squares invitingly upon the pink plates, Ludwig suddenly opened the kitchen door and entered. He seemed both disconcerted and displeased at seeing the visitor, and stood shifting from foot to foot, his long white lashes resting as usual on his red cheeks, which were growing decidedly plump, a fact, it may be observed, which did not improve his personal appearance. His face lacked its customary smile.

"Do you want anything, Ludwig?"

In spite of her aversion, increased by the inopportunity of his advent, Molly felt sorry for his evident embarrassment.

"No," he replied, continuing to stand by the door and to sway uneasily back and forth. He raised his unintelligent green eyes, which looked more than ever like those of a fish, and fixed them unsmilingly upon Jack, in such a way that it was quite evident that he considered his presence an intrusion.

Molly could not very well suggest that he depart, since the kitchen was preëminently his, as well as Ellen's, ground.

"Come on, Jack," she said. "I can wash the skillet by-and-by. I'll let it soak."

Half an hour later, when she returned to a performance of her duty, she found Ludwig seated by the table. He had not removed his cap, and seemed in considerable agitation.

"Mays Molly," he began at once, fumbling awkwardly in his coat pocket, "deyse es for you. Some one dey gib et to may for you." He rose without another word, having placed in her hand a letter. Then he crossed the kitchen, moving for once with rapidity, and, opening the door, closed it hastily upon himself.

Molly still stood in the center of the kitchen and laughed. What *would* happen next?

The letter was addressed in a queer, straggling, foreign hand, with all sorts of quirks and curlicues in odd places, and very near the top of the envelope. It came to her suddenly that it must be from Ludwig himself.

A queer feeling of premonition came over her as, her eyebrows drawn into a frown, she opened the missive.

It was indeed from Ludwig.

It began, "Esteemed Lady," and ended, "Your faithful and obedient admirer."

Every drop of blood in Molly's body seemed to fly into her face and then to burn its way over her entire frame. She had never before known such a quivering, blinding rage as that which now engulfed her.

Ludwig! That poor, miserable, half-witted creature! How had she ever lowered herself that he should so presume?

Ludwig had proposed to her. After stating at some length his own perfections, chief among which was that he had never known the acquaintance of any other woman, he brought his epistle to a close by assuring her that he would become in time a great artist, and that in the meanwhile they could have the farm and take care of the "old folks."

CHAPTER VI

LUDWIG!

For several moments Molly lay on her bed without moving, a prey, alternately, to shame and merriment. Once she laughed out loud at the remembrance of the writer's face as he handed her the mis-sive, now scattered ignominiously about the room, and once she said, "Imbecile!" so vehemently that had any one been upstairs at the time he must have heard.

"Are you here, dear?"

"Yes, Little Mama." She rose quickly to a sitting position.

"All in the dark!"

Mrs. Wintringham's tone betokened surprise as she seated herself on the edge of the bed.

"Yes," replied Molly, assuming her former position and laying her head in her grandmother's lap, "and it is just as well that we are, for I have something dreadful to tell you." Mrs. Wintringham laughed gently. Molly's "dreadfuls" were not apt to be very alarming.

"You needn't laugh, Little Mama," she said, "for this time it *is* *dreadful* without the slightest exaggeration. I don't know what can be done about it, for no one would ever in the world work for grandfather as Ludwig does, and allow him to change the proper way of doing things, and experiment, and all the rest; and, on the other hand, who would be willing to put up with Ludwig's silliness, and incompetence, and his insufferable impertinence?"

"My dear child!" Mrs. Wintringham began to stroke the soft black hair, whose little tendrils clung about her fingers. "Silly and incompetent Ludwig certainly is, but I never knew him to be impertinent. What has he been doing?" Her voice sounded indulgent.

"He has asked me to marry him," replied Molly succinctly, hastening to add, "he wrote it in a note and it began, 'Esteemed Lady'! It was perfectly ridiculous. I tore it up. I wish that I had kept it for you to see, but I was furious. He said that we could have the farm and look out for the 'old folks,' and that he was going to be a great artist. What do you think of that?"

She began her tale in a mild, matter-of-fact tone, but her voice gathered indignation as she progressed, —only to disappear in the end in a chuckle of uncontrollable mirth.

"Ludwig proposed to you?" Mrs. Wintringham brought out the words slowly and with such frigidity that Molly sat up and put her arms around her.

"Don't mind, Little Mama," she said. "I was so angry at first that I almost cried, but afterward it seemed funny."

Mrs. Wintringham remained rigid within her embrace.

"Oh, I'm sorry that I told you to-night." Molly laid her cheek against her grandmother's and patted her shoulder.

"Please don't feel so badly," she entreated; "Ludwig doesn't know any better."

"Then he must be taught better." Mrs. Wintringham rose as she spoke and went to the corner window, which gave her a view of the wash-house. It was brilliantly lighted. Without speaking, she picked up

Molly's red cape, which happened to be lying on a chair, and threw it around her shoulders.

"Little Mama, dear." Molly's voice grew beseeching. "You are not going out there now, are you? Why, Ludwig might be almost undressed and ready for bed."

"Then he may dress himself again," replied Mrs. Wintringham. "I shall wait outside the door."

"You mustn't go alone." Molly was becoming alarmed at the effect of her words. Evidently, Ludwig's transgression was even greater than she had considered it. "Let me go with you to the door. I can jump aside if he opens it."

"You may remain in your room, my dear." Once in a great while Mrs. Wintringham had spoken in that tone to Hal, but she had never spoken so to Molly before. It left her breathless with a vague sense of having done wrong in some way. She heard her grandmother's light tread grow fainter as it passed through the ell.

It would never do to let the general know what had occurred. He had started to ascend the front stairs. Molly closed her own door, that he might remain unaware that she was alone. How complicated life was, and the complications arose so suddenly and unexpectedly!

Poor Little Mama! Suppose that Ludwig were not ready to receive her and she had to stand outside in the cold. Molly went to the corner window to watch the progress of events. But no, Little Mama was not forced to wait. The door opened at her rap and she entered.

When Ludwig had delivered to the lady of his choice the missive over which he had toiled so assidu-

ously, he returned to the wash-house, where Hal, a very demon of mischief in his eyes, awaited him. He was sitting on a tall three-legged stool dedicated, as a rule, to the uses of art, although for the time being it was made to serve in the interests of hospitality.

"Well," he inquired in a matter-of-fact tone, "what did she say?"

"Nottin'," answered Ludwig. He removed his cap and overcoat, both of which he had put on for his brief trip to the house, and hung them elaborately on the nail by the door. Clearly he was nervous. He kept wetting his lips, and blinking his eyes, and emitting long sighing breaths. Finally he seated himself in the rocker and, clasping his hands, gazed fixedly at the ceiling, lost in ecstatic reverie.

For fully half an hour he remained thus, while Hal endeavored by every one of his oft-practiced arts to lead him into conversation of the variety in which his soul delighted (Hal was a born humorist, and loved nothing better than to sit, a sober and silent witness to the foibles and frailties of his comrades), but Ludwig's abstraction remained impregnable. When at length it became apparent that no further entertainment would be forthcoming, Hal left his three-legged stool preparatory to saying good-night, but as he did so there came to their ears the click of the kitchen door. He pushed aside the shade and made a crack through which to peer.

"Gee, Ludwig!" he exclaimed, "it's Little Mama. Now you are going to catch it!"

He looked rapidly around the apartment in search of a hiding-place, for to be caught in Ludwig's quarters so immediately upon the heels of recent events would be nothing short of a give-away as to his guilty

participation therein. The wash-house contained one narrow closet, where, in the old days, the ironing-boards were kept, and into this Hal disappeared just as Mrs. Wintringham rapped smartly.

"Come in," said Ludwig, rising to his feet and trembling violently, not, however, through fear. It would have occasioned him not the least surprise had the appearance of his mistress at this late hour been the result of her eagerness to welcome him to the bosom of the family, so great confidence in himself and his own irresistibility lurked at the bottom of his heart.

Mrs. Wintringham's face was white and her eyes glittered ominously as she stepped up into Ludwig's room, carefully closing the door after her. Hal, observing her through a knot-hole in the closet door, was appalled.

"Ludwig," she said, in a cold and scarcely recognizable voice, "Miss Hastings tells me that she has received a very extraordinary note from you, in which you had the unspeakable impertinence to ask her to marry you."

She had a sense of helplessness—since Ludwig in all probability could not understand what she was saying, except as to general drift. There were words sufficiently drastic and to the point to reach his comprehension, but these, being a lady, she could not use.

"Yaas'm," he said, blinking very hard in an unsuccessful attempt to meet her eyes, a slow smile of discomfort encompassing his face. "You halped wrayte et," he added, as a sort of justification to his act.

"As long as you remain on this place," continued Mrs. Wintringham, "never address Miss Hastings again except when strictly necessary. Your presence is objectionable to her in every way."

"Vat?" queried Ludwig, in whose ears the unfamiliar words rang as Greek. "Vat you say 'bout Mays Molly? Shay not layke may?"

Mrs. Wintringham's dignity deserted her for the first time in her life.

"No," she exclaimed, stamping her small foot. "No, she does not like you, you wretched man. Never call her Miss Molly again; her name is Miss Hastings. If you continue to insult her by so much as a glance, I will tell General Wintringham and he will send you away immediately." She was forced to choose words which Ludwig could comprehend, and to make them plicit by her manner.

"Were her brother old enough," her voice began to tremble, her anger having spent itself, "he would chastise you for your presumption; but, as it is, I, a woman, am forced to protect her."

She turned and left the room.

As Hal listened he marveled. What had there been in Ludwig's behavior to make his exquisite little grandmother, from whose lips he had never heard anything but gentleness, lay aside her dignity and her reserve in such a fashion, and visit the wash-house at that time of night? But the question brought its own answer, and he grew hot with shame. He had not suggested to Ludwig that he should propose to Molly, he had not even encouraged it; but he knew that he could have prevented it. He had looked at it only in the light of a huge joke on her, but now, under the scorching fire of his grandmother's words, he understood. He had deliberately held up his sister to insult,—he, who even at sixteen should have been her protector. The thought of Gertrude came to him—Gertrude, whose very name he held too sacred for

common use. How would he have felt had this thing happened to her?

Hal was at an age when boyish instincts toward mischief, and manly instincts toward chivalry, are closely intermingled, and at his grandmother's words the man in him triumphed. He felt ashamed. He wanted to beg Molly's pardon, but that would only have made matters worse, so he resolved to follow his usual and entirely safe policy of keeping his mouth firmly closed. As soon as the coast was clear, he emerged from his retreat, and with a brief "Good-night, Ludwig," departed to the house, where he was forced to climb the grape arbor to his room, Mrs. Wintringham having locked the door. He would never let Molly know that Ludwig had told him. Poor Little Mama! His own lack of chivalry had made it necessary for her to take his place. She reminded him of a helpless little mother-bird fighting to protect her young. A hard lump rose in his throat at the thought, and in that moment there died in his breast that antagonism toward his sister which seemed to have been born there. Perhaps that was what the experience was for.

The next afternoon, as Molly sat in her room busy over her embroidery frame, Hal came to her, and handed her a Jacqueminot rose.

"I bought two," he said, "one for Gertrude and one for you. I thought that you would like it." There was a new, tender expression in his eyes as he handed it to her, and, as Molly gazed up wonderingly into them, the pain of all the years rolled away. This was the first time that Hal had ever voluntarily mentioned Gertrude's name to her.

"Thank you," she replied, her color deepening.

"Molly," Hal swallowed hard, but he went manfully on, "there isn't a girl in the town who can touch you. I am proud to have you for a sister. I've always been a mean little cuss to you, and I'm sorry."

So saying he bent over and kissed her, for the second time in his life, quite of his own accord. She was sitting in the Savonarola chair of carved black oak which Walter had brought her from Florence. She was a picture that any artist would have enjoyed transferring to his canvas. Her crimson cashmere gown, trimmed with velvet ribbon of the same shade, brought out the whiteness of her throat and forehead, the clear red of her cheeks and the soft brilliancy of her eyes, which still retained their quality of eager wistfulness.

"No, you haven't been," she said, laying her hand on his arm. "You have always been splendid, and I wouldn't exchange you for any brother in the world. Thank you ever and ever so much for the rose. How was Gertrude to-day when you called?"

"She had a headache," he replied, in as unconscious a tone as he could command, for this brotherly-sisterly chat was unusual, "so I didn't stay long."

"I'm so sorry." Molly picked up her embroidery again, having pinned the rose at her breast. "Yesterday when I was there she was not feeling a bit well."

Hal turned to leave the room.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye," replied his sister.

When he was gone she sat looking after him for several moments. His actions and words had been

the crowning of her happiness, had it needed any. What a handsome boy he was, and in such a different way from any of the other boys whom she had seen. She sewed industriously for a while, though before long she was lost in day dreams; her starry gaze, fixed in space, burned the confines of the room.

"What are you smiling at, darling?" Mrs. Wintringham stood in the doorway.

"Was I smiling?" Molly looked up in surprise. "It may be just the way that my face goes when I am happy."

Her grandmother looked at her anxiously, for Molly was radiating a joy that filled the very room and overflowed. She was thankful that the trip to Europe was no longer away. There had been an indefinable something in Jack's manner when he bade them good-night the evening before which worried her, not, however, that she had doubted for one moment his constancy to his promise, and there had been an unconscious response in Molly's manner as well.

"See!" Molly held up the white lawn upon which she was at work. "Isn't the pattern coming out nicely? Even if I don't need any new clothes, pretty blouses are always at a premium. One can't have too many of them."

Walter Hamilton returned to the Beeches at the end of two weeks, and from his manner one would not have imagined that anything out of the ordinary had occurred. He was so kind, so tender, and so brotherly at their first meeting that Molly told her grandmother of it afterward in an ecstasy of joy, never dreaming that his behavior was the outcome of deliberate effort to reestablish their relations upon their former footing, since anything short of this would

keep continually before Molly's mind her part in his alteration. He brought for her a brooch, similar to the one which he had brought for Gertrude. And on Sunday Molly took dinner at the Beeches as though nothing of a distressing nature had happened, in company with Hal, he having walked there with her when service was done. As they started off together down the hill from the church-door, the general and his wife stood, arm in arm, looking after them, oblivious of the sympathetic glances cast upon them by their neighbors.

"Aren't they splendid," whispered Mrs. Wintringham. "Hal seems to have entirely outgrown his dislike of Molly's society. Several times lately it has seemed to me that he even sought it."

"I told you that he would come out all right," the general whispered back. "By Jove, look how that boy carries himself! Blood will tell every time, and no mistake." Whereat they turned their faces homeward and proceeded leisurely on their way.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS nearing the end of June, and the whole countryside was abloom with the exquisite colors of early summer. School would close in just one more week, and then the children would add their day-long carolings to those of the happy birds that made Hambletown ring with their notes. Hambletown was a wonderful place for birds, and Molly often climbed into the seats in the old apple trees, which she and Hal had nailed there when they were little, just to watch them and listen to their songs. There were meadow larks that scurried about the nearby field, uttering their sweet plaintive cries, and blackbirds with fiery wings, and golden orioles and tiny yellow birds which looked like canaries, and blue-gray catbirds beautiful in spite of their ugly voices, and bobolinks, and chippies, and woodpeckers, and hummingbirds, and bluebirds as blue as Jack's eyes, and dear everyday, sociable robins calling "cheer up—cheer up—plow it—plow it—dig it up—eat it—tee-hee-hee-hee-hee—tee-hee-hee-hee-hee."

"Oh, aren't they the dearest things, Jack! Look at that little fellow; he has a worm at least six inches long! There, he has swallowed it! I wish Harold were here to see it."

It was Sunday afternoon, and both Molly and Jack Gordon were seated in the largest and oldest and most gnarled of the general's apple trees, well screened from

the house by their curtain of green leaves. Already the tiny apples were beginning to form about them. Overhead the sky was a wonderful clear Italian blue, etched here and there by silvery clouds, and the breeze, which made the delicate tendrils of Molly's hair wave about her face, was warm and odorous with the scent of roses and of honeysuckle. Both of the seats which they occupied were fitted with backs and foot-rests, and Molly held in her lap a volume of Shelley's poetry, from which she had been reading aloud, while Jack looked up adoringly at her from his position further down on the next limb. He loved to have her read to him, because at such times he felt perfectly free to study her face.

Molly took up the volume and began to read again, stopping after a few moments to say, "How the poets loved night, Jack; have you ever thought of it?"

"Yes," he replied, "I have thought of it very often, and I understand it perfectly. My pleasantest walks are at night, that is," he amended laughingly, "solitary walks. Enjoyable companionship in the daytime makes up for the garishness of the light."

"Oh, I was not affronted by your remark."

Molly smiled, and then went on seriously, "I feel in exactly the same way. If I were a poet I would write a whole series of poems dedicated to Night, and dealing with it in all its phases, or if I were a musician I would set it to music, as Beethoven did in the 'Moonlight Sonata.' At night I feel so good, so apart from life, so uplifted. Often and often I rise and sit in my open window, when every one else is asleep, and after I have gazed a while up into the sky, all studded with stars, the mystery of it and the meaning of it fill me with such awe and reverence that I

want to pray out loud. Sometimes I stretch my arms out to it. No wonder that the greatest astronomers were good, God-fearing men. How wonderful it is to realize that all the heavenly bodies are revolving each according to its own divinely appointed law, and that their times and seasons are reckoned in millions of years! How infinitesimal we and our petty plans must seem beside them."

Molly's bosom rose and fell quickly under the stress of her emotions, and her color deepened and paled. How beautiful she was in her simple pink muslin gown, with its girdle of pink satin ribbon and its little edgings and insets of fine lace, sewed all so daintily into place by her own slender fingers. Jack knew that she made her own dresses. Indeed, he was often present during their construction, and they took on new attractiveness for that knowledge. Her color was so clear, her body so lithe and strong and vital, her hair so soft and her eyes so tender. Of all Molly's attributes her eyes were the most noticeably beautiful. It is not often that black eyes give the impression of pellucid depth and childish innocence, yet Molly's did, and they were of such unusual size that invariably they startled whoever confronted them for the first time, causing them to look again in order to verify their first impression.

Jack did not answer her. Instead he said, "I am sorry that Gertrude has been so ill, although I can't but be glad that you did not sail for Europe on the first day of May."

"I am glad, too!" Molly's voice rang out joyously. "But, if by having gone I could wipe out her suffering, I would choose to have gone, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, of course," he responded heartily; "of course,

though it is safe enough to be glad that things are as they are, because they could never have been different, you know!"

They both laughed.

"I saw her yesterday," said Molly. "Poor darling little thing! She looked like a spirit or a baby. Her hair is just beginning to come out all over her head in the dearest little golden rings,—but she is so white and thin. Some people grow ugly when they are thin, I am sure that I should; but she is like Trilby, whose facial bones were so exquisitely modeled, you know, that the more she wasted away the more beautiful she grew. I never understood how that could be until I went with grandfather and Little Mama to Deacon Avery's funeral. He had been a stout man; but all that had disappeared during his last illness, and as he lay in his coffin he was like some beautiful Greek statue carved out of marble."

"What a frightful disease typhoid fever is! It lingers so," Jack went on. "It is amazing that hers should be the only case in town. Have they any idea yet of its source?"

"None whatever," replied Molly. "Mrs. Heaton observes every precaution. The milk and water supply were tested and found to be perfect, as you know."

"When do you suppose that you will really sail?"

"I don't know, Jack; as soon as Gertrude is able to travel, Mrs. Heaton says. Probably by August. A change will do her good."

"If you start as late as that, as a matter of course, you won't be home before September." Jack's voice held a hint of anxiety.

"No, I presume not, but you will be at college all winter, anyway," Molly answered; "and think how

very interesting our letters will be, for both of us will be undergoing such entirely new experiences. You must write everything, every bit of it, and I will, too. When our letters are put together they will make a regular book of impressions—won't it be fun!"

"Yes." Jack's reply was not very hearty.

"And I am so glad that grandfather and Little Mama and Hal are going with us, instead of joining us later. Poor Hal, he won't see much, for he will have scarcely more than two weeks, but that will be something, for Walter will take charge of him and show him several places of interest—London and Paris among the rest—and he will see part of Switzerland, where the rest of us will remain until Gertrude is stronger. We mean to settle for the winter on the Riviera, you know." Molly clasped her hands behind her head and looked up dreamily into the green branches. The phraseology of travel was becoming very familiar to her.

"It is strange, isn't it, Jack," she continued, "how peculiarly ordered our lives are. Nothing could have been further from my thought than a trip abroad, and such an extended and satisfactory one; yet it is materializing as surely as though I were possessed of Aladdin's lamp. You know how much I longed for it and dreamed about it when I was a little girl. Mrs. Heaton is the good geni—genia, I presume I should say. I wonder what the townsfolk think about it all," Molly laughed. "You are the only one who knows that we are 'invited.' They must imagine a fortune has befallen us."

"There comes Walter Hamilton," said Jack. "I can just see the legs of the black horses twinkling along."

"Oh, dear, I am having such a lovely undignified time up here in the tree that I don't want to go in, as much as I should enjoy seeing him." Molly pouted adorably, twisting her head in order to find an opening through the leaves.

"He isn't stopping," said Jack, "and he has Miss Mitchell with him. Your grandfather and grandmother must be on the front porch, because Mr. Hamilton is taking off his hat and Miss Mitchell is waving."

He studied his companion's face as he spoke, but Molly showed only pleasure in the announcement.

"How lovely!" she said, then—"Oh, I am so, so glad!"

"Why?" Jack's curiosity was piqued. The sight of the black horses always brought uncomfortably to his mind his mother's harsh words as to what she had seen in Penny's woods. Why should Molly be "so, so glad," and speak in a tone of such genuine relief? Then the true explanation came to him. Without doubt, Mr. Hamilton had proposed to her, just as his mother had said, but had been refused. The relief evident in Molly's face communicated itself to his own.

"It would be lovely, wouldn't it?" said Molly.

"Yes," replied Jack, with great sincerity. "I've met Mr. Hamilton with Miss Mitchell very often this spring."

"I don't see how he can help loving her." Molly's eyes grew dreamy. "Love, you know, is something over which one has no control."

"Yes—I know," replied Jack.

It was the first time that either of them had broached so personal a subject, and Molly fled from it instantly.

"Come, let us go on reading."

She turned the pages of the small volume, and Jack settled himself more comfortably to listen. When further concentration on the page before her became impossible, she tucked the book up in a crotch of the limb above her and, with her elbow on her knee and her chin in her palm, looked down into her companion's face.

"Jack," she said, recurring to an earlier theme, "you could never guess what I mean to do before I leave Hambletown. I am going to spend one whole beautiful night out of doors, out in the fields. I want to smell the night odors, and hear all the various night sounds as they occur one by one,—sounds of the insects and birds and prowling animals. I want to watch the moon rise and the progress of the stars, and experience all the wonderful sensations that the poets tell of."

Jack looked alarmed, although at first he did not take her seriously.

"It would be a charming way of spending a night," he said, laughing a little, "if it were only more practicable; but there is the dew, you know, and tramps, and—but you are only joking."

"I am not joking a bit." Molly's mouth took on an expression of determination.

"But you must not, Molly. Your grandmother would not like it, and, besides, it would not be safe."

Molly's mischief grew. "But I am going to spend a night in grandfather's pasture," she said, "under the big maple. That long line of blackberry bushes and birch trees between the tree and the road would prevent any one from seeing me, even if any one were there; and they are so near the tree that they will keep away the north wind, if there is any blowing.

I'll take a blanket and a pillow and I'll wear my red cape with the hood. But you may come with me as my bodyguard, if you so desire, to scare away tramps and toads and spotted snakes with double tongues." She laughed gaily and trilled into Shakespeare's song. "That makes it all right, doesn't it? Why, what is the matter, Jack?" She gazed at him in alarm, for a burning red had overspread his face.

"Molly, I beg of you, do not embark upon any such foolish prank. It is not safe for you to spend the night out there alone, and I ought not to encourage you, or remain there with you."

Jack had meant to say that it would not be proper, but the words stuck in his throat. Who was he that he should instruct Molly in the rules of etiquette?

"Wouldn't you enjoy spending a night with me under the maple tree?" she asked, a look of grieved surprise coming into her face, "when I am going away so soon?"

"Of course I would, you infant, you; but there are other things to consider besides what I would enjoy, or what you would enjoy, either."

During the entire course of their conversation Jack had never before looked nor spoken like that. Molly straightened up with an air of wounded dignity.

"Very well, Jack, I did not know that you felt so."

In a moment she made a little movement as though to descend. Jack's heart smote him as he looked at her face. It had grown quite pale.

"Forgive me," he said, contritely. "You know, or you ought to know, that nothing could make me happier than to spend a night with you under the maple tree in the pasture. It is you that I am thinking of, not myself."

Molly's face became radiant at once.

"Aren't you strong enough to defend me against tramps and bats?" she inquired severely.

"Of course I am," he replied, "but you know that your grandfather and grandmother will not allow it." He laughed at his own folly in not recognizing before the impossibility of the scheme.

"I am perfectly sure that they would, if they knew that I wanted to," she replied sweetly; "but I am not going to tell them. I've never had a secret in all my life, except the secret cupboard, and that is not a real one except from Hal and Ellen. And I've never done one single thing that every one didn't know about. Of course, I wouldn't do anything bad, but this isn't bad. They would both understand my feelings and allow it, only that would spoil half the fun. I shall tell them all about it afterward. If you won't come with me, I will go alone."

Jack knew that she would. What remained for him? Slowly his initial repugnance to the idea lessened as he realized that, theoretically improper though it might be, it was highly probable that no one would be the wiser. He could not very well break faith with her and inform the general and his wife of her intentions, praiseworthy as such a course of action might appear from a certain point of view, and neither could he desert her and leave her to pursue her folly alone.

"Very well," he said gently, "I will."

"Oh, I am so glad that you are sensible," said Molly. "It is true that it wouldn't be proper for me to go to the theater with you alone, but that is simply due to the fact that society establishes certain artificial rules which must be obeyed, if one would not make

one's self conspicuous, but such a rule cannot apply here."

She looked him full in the eyes as she spoke, with such candor shining in her own that he looked down, uncomfortably conscious of his own unworthiness.

"How can you leave the house without being seen?" he asked, with becoming meekness.

"I'll wait till every one is abed and asleep," she replied. "Let us do it next week, because the moon won't rise then until late. Ellen goes to bed early, and so does Ludwig, and they sleep so soundly that it is all one can do to waken them. Hal is the only one who might be prowling around. Oh, I know, suppose we decide on Wednesday, because he is going to spend the night with Jimmy Woodrow. They are planning to cram for an examination. They have the last one on Thursday, and it is the hardest. So, Jack, be ready on Wednesday, if it doesn't rain. I'll tiptoe around through the ell as soon as grandfather and Little Mama are asleep, and I shall return at dawn. Oh, how I long to see the dawn out in the stillness, with only the birds singing to welcome it. I shall leave the blanket and pillow in the barn, and you can get them and carry them out and wait for me. You'd better be there by ten o'clock."

Molly's face was glowing and alive with delighted anticipation as she slipped down out of the old apple tree; but the uncomfortable red had reappeared in Jack's, and he spoke little as they returned to the house.

CHAPTER VIII

THE three days following Molly's decision to spend an entire night in the pasture beneath the great maple tree were days filled for her with delicious excitement. The whole scheme was so novel, so exceedingly different from anything that she had ever done before, during the course of her well-ordered life. Again and again she was tempted to take her grandmother into her confidence. It was hard to carry out any plan of action upon which she had not set the seal of her approval. Indeed, as the hours passed, Molly found the task of keeping her secret inviolate one of the most difficult that she had ever undertaken. She held to her purpose, however, considering it an evidence of weakness in her mental constitution that it was her duty to eradicate. Why should she, a young woman of nineteen, be forced to submit every thought, every act, to her grandmother's decision? Should she be able to decide nothing for herself? It was not as though it were something of which Mrs. Wintringham would disapprove. How, indeed, could she disapprove?

Early on Monday morning, long before breakfast was ready, Molly was in the pasture, walking round and round the tree, trying to fix upon the spot best adapted to her purpose.

After breakfast, when she had gone to her room to set it in order for the day (she took care also of Hal's

room and of that occupied by her grandfather and grandmother), the general turned to his wife with an air of anxiety.

"Does Molly appear to you quite normal?" he inquired. "Somehow it has seemed to me for the last few days as though she were under the stimulation of some inner excitement. It shows in the expression of her eyes. She laughs scarcely at all, and seems in a continual state of happy expectancy."

It was a very clear and correct analysis of the atmosphere which Molly, quite without her own knowledge, carried about with her.

"I have observed it," returned Mrs. Wintringham. "I never saw her as beautiful as she has grown within the last few days. Do you suppose that——" she hesitated.

"No," answered the general decisively. "I have complete confidence in the boy's integrity."

"And, as a matter of course," added his wife gently, "in that case Molly would have told me. The dear child has no secrets from me."

They rose from the breakfast table, where they had lingered for a few moments' chat, and adjourned to the porch. In his hand the general held the morning paper, which he had taken from the hall table in passing, while his wife carried a very elegant darning-bag of green velvet lined with lavender silk, containing socks belonging to her husband. The bag was far too choice for the use to which it was put, but Molly had fashioned it from pieces of velvet and silk given her by Mrs. Heaton, and it would never do to hurt her feelings. It had a large "W" embroidered upon one side in green of a lighter shade.

They took their usual positions, the willow table

between them. Around the pillars of the porch and over the trellis at the end clambered the June roses, intertwined with honeysuckle and trumpet flowers, among which bees droned as they shared their store of sweet with two humming birds, which darted nervously to and fro.

"Well, my dear," said the general, "it is June and here we are."

"And here we are likely to remain for some time to come," added his wife. "I am not sorry, however. Midsummer is a pleasanter time for an ocean voyage than early spring. Were it not for Jack and his constant propinquity to Molly, I should rejoice in the delay, much as I deplore its cause. If Gertrude's convalescence is sufficiently rapid, we may be able to start in two or three weeks. Mrs. Heaton means to take a trained nurse with her. At all events, everything is in readiness. How fortunate it is that we are well stocked with trunks, large and small, and that in the day in which they were purchased trunks were well constructed."

"It is, indeed," acquiesced the general.

When Molly had completed her household tasks, which were neither many nor laborious, she slipped off her morning gown of blue gingham, replacing it by a cool white muslin. She bound a scarlet ribbon around her unruly curls, and taking her linen parasol, started for Broadhurst, Mrs. von Orth's home. A little white linen bag, containing her embroidery, hung from one wrist. She came down the front stairs to avoid Mrs. Gordon, who was washing in the kitchen. She never used the back stairs on Mondays. She was as perfect an expression of lovely girlhood as could be imagined as she stepped out upon the porch, where

her grandparents were sitting, and kissed them good-bye. They watched her silently for a few moments as she made her way up the road, and then the old man said, his voice grown husky:

"To think of the life that might have been hers for the mere accepting! Love, my dear, is an uncertain passion. I think that nowadays the vagaries of young people are too seriously considered."

Mrs. Wintringham made no reply, her sentiments being surprisingly akin to those of her husband.

Molly, however, walked lightly and swiftly over the country roads, her heart as happy as that of a singing bird. She had no regrets. Never once since the day upon which she had refused to marry Walter Hamilton had she thought of the life that might have been hers.

The home which Mrs. von Orth had built for herself and Harold differed as greatly from the Beeches as from Locust Cottage. It was exactly the kind of a place suited to the rearing of a sturdy little boy, who needed haymows in which to tumble and woods in which to wander. All of these Broadhurst supplied, since it was none other than an extensive farm, whose farmhouse Harold's mother had torn down, replacing it by a large quaintly devised, Queen Anne structure of wood and stone.

Long before Molly reached the gate she saw seated upon one of the posts a small chubby figure, which in another instant had leaped down and now came flying along the road toward her, arms outspread.

"Aunt Molly, Aunt Molly! Hello, Aunt Molly!"

Harold threw himself into her arms, regardless of her fresh gown. He did not soil it, however, since her visit was expected, and he had been put in order and seated on the gatepost to await her coming. He had

grown into a splendid, rosy-cheeked little fellow, straight backed and firmly knit, with clear blue eyes and the forehead of a thinker.

"I made mud pies yesterday," he confided, as he slipped his hand into his companion's, "and baked them in the sun. I saved one for you. They are fluted like the little cakes Maria makes. She loaned me her tins."

"Thank you ever so much, dear," Molly replied. "I shall wrap it in tissue paper and put it in my bag to take home."

"And my Shetland pony has come," continued Harold. "I'll give you a ride in my new cart."

"I should love to ride with you," she answered, her eyes shining with tenderness as she gazed down into the lovely child-face turned up to her.

At the gate they met the nursery governess, who had lingered for a word of greeting. Mrs. von Orth stood on the wide porch. She was as beautiful as upon the day that Molly first saw her, but the look of fragility was gone. To Molly she seemed scarcely older than herself.

"Harold has scarcely been able to wait to give Aunt Molly a ride behind his new Shetland pony," she said, as she kissed her visitor. "Topsy is all harnessed and waiting for you."

So Molly laid aside her embroidery and her parasol, and accompanied the little boy to the barn. She played with him all the morning, riding with him round and round the drives that led over the farm, and when he tired of that, accompanied him to his kitchen under an elm tree, where in neat rows upon a bench lay the fluted mud pies, one of which she received with appropriate gratitude. She ended her visit by reading

aloud from his book of fairy tales, while he lay in the swinging couch near by.

It was high noon when she left Broadhurst for the Beeches, where she was expected to luncheon. When she arrived she found that Gertrude had been moved into her mother's beautiful white boudoir, where she lay upon a couch of white satin, the white of her skin and the pale gold of her hair carrying out the color scheme of the room.

When Molly had entered this room for the first time four years ago, she was so awed that it was several moments before she could speak. She not only never had seen anything like it, but she had never dreamed in her most vivid imaginings that such a room could exist. It was very large, as large as the Christ Church Sunday-school room, with a long row of diamond-paned windows on the south side opening outward, and it was done entirely in white, relieved by touches of gold. A carpet made of sheepskin clipped very close to the pelt covered the floor. The furniture and woodwork so perfectly resembled ivory that it was difficult not to be deceived by it, and it was exquisitely carved. The deep tufted couch upon which Gertrude lay and the numerous easy chairs were all upholstered in cream-colored brocade, with which also the walls were hung. Here and there through the brocade, at wide intervals, ran faint threads of gold.

But Molly had grown accustomed to the room, as she had to everything new, in thought as well as along material lines, which Mrs. Heaton had brought into her life. The room merely provided a fitting background to her hostess and to Gertrude, who smiled and made a little movement of her hand as she entered. Gertrude had grown very fond of Molly in her own

quiet way, and her mother could see a change in her toward greater spontaneity, which she attributed to the influence of Molly's exuberance. Gertrude seemed to have gained in the ability to express her own emotions.

"Well, little snowbird," Molly sank to her knees beside the couch and kissed Gertrude's forehead, "you are looking so, so much better; isn't she, Mrs. Heaton? There's just the tiniest tinge of pink in your cheeks."

"I am better," said Gertrude; "in a few days I shall be able to walk, perhaps."

"Oh, I'm so glad. It has seemed cruel and selfish in me to be so well and strong while you had to suffer. But you will be quite well soon, and you will enjoy it all the more for having been ill. What lovely violets!" Molly bent over the bowl of English violets standing on a very small ivory table at Mary's side. There was no mistaking the ivory of the table.

"Hal gave them to me," returned Gertrude, looking gravely up into Molly's eyes. "He is very considerate." She said it just as would a mature woman, effectually closing the subject. Then Molly noticed something strange about the room, something which held her spellbound,—and this something was the presence of two pictures of whose existence she had until now been unaware.

She was well used to the entrancing "Loves," which looked as though they were ready to scramble down from the picture into one's arms, the Bouguereau, with its lambent flesh, the soft sunrises, and the woods filled with sunlight; but there were other pictures here to-day. What she had supposed to be merely carven ivory panels, and part of the decoration of the room, were really doors, shutting away from sight that which was too sacred for everyday inspection. The inner

sides of these doors were of gold, and when they were opened one pair disclosed the full-length portrait of a man, a tall, powerful man, with tawny hair and a broad white forehead. He wore a hunting jacket and knee breeches, and carried a gun. The background represented green leaves and deep golden brown shadows. His face breathed power in contour and in every line, but the expression of the steady eyes was one of great kindness.

Molly gazed up into his face spellbound. The presence in the room of that massive and virile personality,—for the picture was so intense that one could not but feel in the presence of reality,—charged it, as it were, with psychic currents. If she, stranger to him as she was, could feel it, how much more must it be felt by one who had loved and been loved by him. She understood at once. This must have been Mrs. Heaton's husband.

"How wonderful he is!" She turned slowly and looked at her hostess, who was gazing up into the pictured face, yearning written large over her own. Molly felt the futility of further speech before this thing which could not be compassed by words. For the first time in her life she felt the existence of shadow as well as of sunlight. As this strong man had been taken away, so might others be taken,—others whom she loved. A tremor passed over her and something akin to terror, as of premonition. When she turned and met her hostess' eyes her own were filled with tears. Mrs. Heaton smiled, mistaking the cause of her perturbation, and supposing it to be merely the result of sympathy. She regained her own composure instantly, and said cheerfully:

"This is a picture of my husband. He was just

as thoroughly good and kind and stalwart as he appears there. And that was my son."

She moved as she spoke to the other pair of open doors, from which there looked down upon them a beautiful, noble boy, the smaller image of the man. He was about ten years old. He had the same large, steady blue eyes and wide white brow and tawny hair, though the soft curved mouth had not settled as yet into the firm lines displayed by that of his father.

"Oh, Mrs. Heaton," Molly breathed, pity rushing over her to the exclusion of more personal emotions, "I never knew that you had a son."

"They were taken from me together," replied Mrs. Heaton, "through an accident upon the water. My husband was drowned in an attempt to rescue Harland."

Without saying more, she closed both sets of ivory doors and returned to her position near Gertrude's couch.

"If Harland had lived," Gertrude said, softly, "he would be almost eighteen years old now. I wish that I had a brother. Hal is just a little like a brother. Sometimes he calls me his little sister."

She spoke in a faint voice, with long pauses between the words, and that gave to her unusual expression of sentiment an appealing plaintiveness. Molly abruptly opened her bag and secured her embroidery, which afforded her an opportunity of hiding her eyes.

She did not visit the entire afternoon with Mrs. Heaton and Gertrude, however, for Gertrude after her brief hour of recreation had been carried back to bed by no less a person than her uncle, who returned from a ten-mile tramp soon after luncheon. After that Molly practiced for an hour on the piano in the studio,

which was situated far enough from Gertrude's room not to disturb her, and when that was done she sat for Walter, just as she had been in the habit of doing before "it" happened—the event which she had well-nigh forgotten.

It was difficult for her to realize, as he gazed at her in his kindly, impersonal manner, that he had ever visited privately with her grandfather in his study and had then taken her driving through Penny's woods, where he had——, but no! brush the thought away. Molly banished it instantly, and as she did so its place was filled with thought of Jack. Involuntarily she smiled.

"Molly, you are enchanting." Walter spoke banteringly. "What are you smiling at?"

"Little Mama asks me that all the time," she returned, "and I'll have to give you the same answer that I give her. It is just the way that my mouth happens to be constructed; I'm really not smiling at all, or at least I don't know it if I am."

A few moments later he said, painstakingly handling his brush and looking intently at his work, "Molly, I am going to marry Eleanor."

"Oh!" Molly sprang from the settle where she had been gracefully reclining. "I am so glad, Walter!" She held out her hand, both hands in fact, but she was forced to seize his wrists, since his hands were otherwise engaged. She shook them vigorously up and down while he laughed at her efforts.

"Hold on," he exclaimed. "There," he laid his palette and brush carefully on the table. "Now I am ready." So saying, he grasped her hand right heartily.

"Tell me about it?" she said.

Walter laughed amusedly. "Tell you about it? What is there to tell? Of all the ladies whom you know, whom would you pick out for me as the sweetest, most beautiful, and best wife?"

"Why, Eleanor Mitchell, of course," replied Molly.

"Then," said Walter, assuming an argumentative tone, "what is left in the way of explanation? Eleanor accepted me yesterday and has made me most happy. We have been together considerably this spring, as you know, and how could the propinquity of two such entirely suitable and charming people result otherwise?"

"It couldn't." Molly's face dissolved in smiles, as it had been wont to do years before when she was very happy.

"And Eleanor will accompany us on our trip. She has consented to a brief engagement, in view of the necessity of my spending the next year abroad."

"Oh, goody, goody, goody!" Molly clapped her hands. "Everything and every one is lovely! And I am happier than I have ever been in all my life. Oh, Walter! I am so glad!"

CHAPTER IX

THOSE things are too heavy for you, Molly; let me carry them."

"Nonsense," laughed Molly. "Didn't I bring them out to the barn? Besides you made it very clear that you thought it best that I should cross the fields alone. You should never allow sentiment to cloud judgment, you know." She was evidently repeating one of his own remarks.

"You have me there," he replied. He picked up the blankets which they had folded neatly, and laid them on her outstretched arm. Upon these he piled the pillows. "Good-bye. See, already the colors in the sky are beginning to fade. Last night was the happiest night of my life."

"And of mine, too," she made answer.

Jack did not leave his position beneath the maple until Molly had disappeared into the alley between the barn and the carriage-house, having turned for one last wave of her hand. The pink had almost disappeared from the sky as he reluctantly withdrew from the overhanging branches, which had harbored such an excess of happiness during one long, blissful night. What mattered it that his body was cramped and stiff, and that his face was pale? There would be time when he reached home for an hour or more of refreshing slumber, since it was not yet five o'clock. He would enter his room by way of the window, which

opened upon the green behind the cottage, and go immediately to bed. He could depend upon his alarm to awaken him.

He moved slowly along the path which Molly had trod but a few moments before, until he had traversed half its distance, when he turned sharply to the left and passed through a gap in the bushes and over a narrow foot-bridge, which spanned the brook. In a few moments he had reached the highway, along which he swung at a lively pace, whistling softly to himself.

Truly, it had been the happiest night of his life. He could feel yet the pressure of Molly's head upon his shoulder, the caress of her hair as the night wind blew the stray tendrils against his cheek, could hear her quick, regular breathing, and smell the faint fragrance of orris and violet which exhaled from her clothing. Over and over and he repeated to himself all the sweet girlish fancies to which she had given utterance.

The air was delightfully refreshing. Jack took long breaths and hastened his walk. The birds were caroling about him, and a fresh breeze had sprung up. Surely there was no time so beautiful as early morning, unless, he was forced to add, it might be the night, when one sat alone under the silent stars, beside the woman whom one loved.

Meanwhile, Molly had reached the house in safety, having deposited in the barn the blankets and pillows. She did not stop at the porch to remove her shoes, but went indoors immediately. Once she had gained the security of the kitchen and had bolted the door, she seated herself in Ellen's rocker and performed the unpleasantly furtive act which caution rendered imperative. This having been accomplished, she placed her shoes, still encased in their rubbers, upon the back-

stairs, and, noiselessly entering the dining-room, hid the box which Jack had given her far back in the most remote and unsuspected corner of the secret cupboard. She made not a sound as she closed the cupboard door, descended from the chair upon which she had been forced to stand, and retraced her steps to the creaking back stairs, which she mounted in safety.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she reached the sanctuary of her own room. It was over, everything had gone perfectly; there had not been a flaw anywhere.

Jack Gordon walked more slowly as he came in sight of his home, the little three-roomed cottage in which his entire boyhood had been passed, that is, all of it which he could remember. He would be leaving it soon. The thought brought with it just the ghost of a pang, for, although it had been cramped and in many ways uncomfortable,—although it lacked all of those tender memories by means of which a mother's love can hallow the most desolate of habitations,—nevertheless, it was home, the only one which he had ever known. In it he had pursued those studies by means of which he had risen by slow degrees to his present stage of success.

Truly, it was a good thing to know that, hidden in that wooden chest made by himself, lay a high-school diploma, and that in another three months he would be hard at work in college,—that dream of his boyhood days, before he had known Molly, bless her heart! He smiled as he recalled the scene of nearly six years ago, when she, wearing her little pink sunbonnet, had sat disconsolately in her grandfather's chair beneath the horsechestnut tree.

In this same small, three-roomed cottage he had

dreamed dreams, and had seen visions—visions of a future wherein appeared ever a sweet, womanly face of exceeding delicacy, with tender, wistful, childish eyes. And the cottage was not unattractive, viewed from the artistic standpoint. It was embowered deep in ivy and crimson rambler roses. Mr. Hamilton had once painted it. Many blessings had come to him while he had been its occupant,—education and the awakening of his ideals for the future; but not second to these was the confidence placed in him by Mr. Sawyer, who loved him as he would have loved a son, and who had entrusted to him his most intimate affairs.

As Jack neared the cottage, lost in his own pleasant thoughts, his attention became suddenly riveted by signs of commotion within. He could distinctly see people moving about. The living-room door was open, and there came menacingly to his ears the crash of some heavy impact. At first he could with difficulty credit his senses, and looked at his watch to see if it were going. It lacked just a quarter to five o'clock. He started to run, and reached the door in time to see his mother, in company with two men, enter his own bedroom. Even in that moment of stress he wondered why they had not thought of so simple an expedient as looking in at his window, that is, if they were bent upon finding him. He knew instinctively that it was he whom they sought. They had forced the lock of his door.

The men, who, in company with Mrs. Gordon, were rapidly tearing to pieces her son's usually well-kept room, were Sheriff Judkins and his assistant, a young man who had graduated from the high school when Jack did nearly two years before. He recognized

them before they saw him. Although they could have but barely entered the room, the mattress was on the floor and the contents of the bureau drawers scattered upon the table. A vague fear encompassed him, and he stood as one transfixed. It did not occur to him to run. His mother was the first of the trio to see him.

"There he is, men; seize him!" she screamed, her face becoming distorted with rage until she resembled one of the Furies. "So there ain't no place on earth where I can get to be free of the disgrace! Lock him in jail, and good riddance, if you keep him there all the rest of his life. His father before him died in prison, and it's the same will happen to him, I hope. Ye hound out of hell, ye! It's in the blood!"

She turned from the men to her son, who had become an ashy white, though he continued to stand upright. In another moment streaks of red appeared against the pallor of his cheeks, as though he had been struck by the lash of a whip. He forgot to wonder what the sheriff desired with him, why his mother had cried, "Seize him," why they had broken into his room. He heard only the words: "His father before him died in prison"—and "It's in the blood."

The past became illuminated with a ghastly light. His father had been a criminal—had died in prison! That explained fully his mother's reticence and his consequent inability to trace his relatives upon his father's side. That was what she had meant when she had prophesied that he would come to a bad end as had his father. He had supposed until now that she had referred merely to financial failures.

While he looked from one to the other of the group, his dazed mind unable to come to any clear conclu-

sion, the sheriff stepped up and snapped upon his wrists a pair of handcuffs, and said, "You are under arrest."

"For what?" At last Jack's reason and pride asserted themselves. He had put his question peremptorily. A good night's sleep would have done much toward clearing up the situation.

"Mr. Sawyer's store was robbed this morning, somewhere in the neighborhood of three o'clock, of one thousand dollars," Mr. Judkins explained more gently.

Until now the sheriff had been filled with a purely impersonal zeal for doing his duty, whether that duty included the running to earth of friend or foe. His eyes had snapped with excitement and with satisfaction no less avidly than had the manacles as he had bagged his game; but a reaction came as he looked into the weary, stricken face of the young man whom he had always both trusted and honored. The human in him triumphed over the professional.

"I'm sorry, my boy," he said; "it's the cursedest trip I ever made. I don't believe you did it no more than does Mr. Sawyer, but the watchman described a man who came out of the store so near like you, and who ran toward this end of the town when he was chased, that we had nothing left but to come here. We spent more than an hour searching for him. If you had been in bed and asleep, now, it wouldn't be so against you."

"Where were ye last night?" shrieked his mother. She gave the impression of one bereft of sanity. She was clad in a loose, unbecoming cotton wrapper of mottled green, which she had flung over her nightgown at the sheriff's knock. Her hair straggled over her shoulders in sparse, dry, tow-colored strands.

"Tell me that! Where were ye last night, sneakin' out of yer room after kissin' me good-night, ye Judas, ye! Much good will yer kisses do ye now, an' never touchin' yer bed at all, while ye climbed out of yer window an' went to rob yer employer who trusted ye. Ye thought to get back from hidin' yer swag afore they found ye out, didn't ye, my fine laddie buck, but they were too fast for ye. Look at his shoes, wet and muddy from the fields he's traveled."

She ended her tirade by a cackle of shrill laughter of so demoniacal a character that the men all three gazed at her in alarm, which on Sheriff Judkins' part changed to disgust.

"That will do, Mrs. Gordon." He spoke brusquely. "Your son has not yet been found guilty. He will receive a fair trial, and if he can prove that he was elsewhere last night he will be acquitted." Turning again to Jack, he said, "Where were you last night, my boy?" His successful capture had entirely lost its savor.

"I," began Jack confidently, and then his face crimsoned from his collar far up under the roots of his hair. He could not prove an alibi without betraying Molly. What would the harpies of Hambletown—and there were as many of them there as in any other small country town, who daily glutted themselves with the shredded reputations of whomever fell into their clutches—what would they say if it should become noised abroad that Molly Hastings, Hambletown's choicest flower, had passed a night alone in the general's pasture in company with a young man?

Jack's lips shut in a grim line, and his eyes sought the floor.

"If you will come with me peaceably," said Mr.

Judkins, "I'll take off these. I don't want to make it any harder for you than I can help. At all events, you couldn't very well get away, for by this time the whole town will be alive with the thing."

"I won't try to escape," returned Jack, so curtly that Mr. Judkins was betrayed into an apology concerning his duty, in which the prisoner cut him short with a brief:

"I understand."

Jack stumbled as he left the cottage door, and Mr. Judkins steadied him, glancing pityingly, as well as keenly, at his haggard face. It seemed incredible that features could so change, and in so brief a time. Could it be that the boy had at this last moment succumbed to temptation, driven, perchance, by his need of money? His eyes moistened at the possibility. Why, any one of a dozen of Hambletown's well-to-do citizens would gladly have put their hands into their pockets to come to his assistance, had he applied to them. And the story concerning his father! That would do much toward damning him in the eyes of the townspeople, who, though on the whole kindly, were possessed in common with the majority of mankind of an amazing facility for changing their minds, and in tearing down a popular idol,—and, in truth, as Jack had developed into manhood, kindly, obliging, honest, and self-respecting, he had become such. His good looks had not been to his discredit, either, nor his intimate association with the occupants of Locust Cottage and the Beeches.

The news of the robbery had been pretty well scattered by the time that the sheriff's buggy, which had been hidden in a clump of trees beyond the cottage when Jack first approached it, clattered into town

bearing himself and his prisoner. There were many people, chiefly men and boys, both singly and in groups, standing here and there on the corners of the streets. Had Jack raised his head he would have seen familiar faces—faces which until to-day had always welcomed his approach, but which now expressed nothing but the frankest curiosity and made no attempt at recognition.

He stumbled again as he mounted the steps of the little stone jail. The cell into which Mr. Judkins ushered him was not uncomfortable, for, with rare kindness, he had chosen one situated in a corner of the building and boasting two windows, facing one to the south, the other to the east, which afforded a pleasant current of air, and the cot was clean. The boy entered it gratefully, glad to escape the pitiless glare of day and the prying eyes of his fellows. His brain, exhausted by lack of sleep and benumbed by the shock of his mother's revelation, could not take in clearly the extent of the disaster which had befallen him. He sensed vaguely that his life had been broken off short, as it were, his dearest hopes blasted. For with such a disgrace in his immediate family, even should he be able to prove his own innocence, he could never offer his love to Molly. Poverty was not sufficient to keep them apart—he knew Molly too well for that—but disgrace was another matter.

Then suddenly, as he sat dejectedly upon the striped prison blanket that covered his cot, everything grew dim. The world, his misfortune, his home, and even Molly, became as things belonging to another life, and he was overcome by an intense desire to sleep. It was the demand of a healthy constitution, coupled with a clear conscience, and in obedience to it he stretched

himself out and slept. It was so that Mr. Sawyer found him later in the morning, when he called at the jail. His own face was as gray and as drawn as Jack's had been when he entered it some hours before. He would have given much had he discovered his loss privately and had talked with Jack before taking any steps toward prosecution, but the evidence had all been of such a public and such an incriminating nature that he had been powerless to meet the catastrophe. The matter had been taken out of his hands from the start.

"He's been asleep for four hours," said Mr. Judkins softly, as he unlocked the cell door and ushered Mr. Sawyer in.

"Not much criminal about that." Mr. Sawyer seated himself by the cot, on the one chair which the cell contained.

"Unless," returned the sheriff, "it's due to an all-night bat." The witticism, however, died on his lips as he looked at the youth, who lay flat on his back in the profoundest slumber, his thick yellow hair streaming from his broad forehead and over the pillow. All marks of weariness and of grief had left the face.

"I don't believe that he did it," said Mr. Sawyer firmly, "and if there was any way of dropping the prosecution I would end the thing right here; but it would be attributed to my affection for him and he would be irretrievably injured. Better let him fight it out and prove his innocence, inasmuch as it has gone so far. I know the boy. He is as incapable of robbing me as I would be of robbing myself."

"But where was he last night? He turned red and shut up like a clam when I asked him about it. And why should he sneak out of his room by way of the window and not come back until morning? I never

heard that he belonged to the gang of young toughs who find their pleasures after other folks have gone to bed. He's never been in bad company, either of man or woman. Those things get about town, you know."

"The boy is clear of crime. Look at his face."

"As to faces," continued Mr. Judkins, "I don't fancy Flemming's, but his night is accounted for. He was in bed and asleep half an hour after the robbery. He went to a dance until half after twelve o'clock, when he and Murphy took a girl home. Murphy and he room together.

"They were seen and heard at two o'clock, going to their own boarding-place, singing at the top of their lungs. They roused the neighborhood. Looks almost like it was planned. They roomed on the fourth floor and were talking and disturbing the folks at half-past two. At three o'clock, or a little before, Flemming borrowed some brandy from Mrs. Crim, the landlady, for cramps, and at half after three a party found him asleep and all the other boarders ready to swear to his having been there for some time. And, anyway, the man hadn't time to get to that locality and to bed, for he was headed in the opposite direction. It wasn't until we couldn't get into Gordon's room, or rouse him, that I began to smell a rat, and then he came in." With this Mr. Judkins withdrew, locking the cell door after him.

Although the whispered conversation had not awakened him, it had filtered into Jack's consciousness disturbingly, and in a few minutes he opened his eyes to find his employer seated beside him and looking at him intently. He rose to a sitting position instantly and stared about him, and then the meaning of his

strange surroundings came to him. A flush spread over his face. He scarcely knew how to greet the man from whom he had parted with such mutual good feeling the night before; but Mr. Sawyer saved him any embarrassment by stretching out his hand and saying:

"Jack, my boy, I know that you are innocent. We'll fight this thing through together. The safe was not broken into. Whoever opened it knew the combination and had a key to the store as well, or else he was mighty clever at picking locks. Where were you last night?"

He brought out the words anxiously.

Jack looked him squarely in the face, while his own paled. "I cannot tell you, sir," he answered.

"Not to save possible imprisonment on a false charge?"

"No, sir."

"Is it because you are shielding a woman?"

Mr. Sawyer spoke incredulously. It was the last thing which he would have thought of Jack.

The young man's pallor became streaked with red, as when he first learned of his father's disgrace.

"There is nothing that I can say, Mr. Sawyer," he replied.

His employer's face fell. Evidently there was a side of Jack which even he, after so considerable an association, did not know. He rose to his feet as though with an effort.

"Then, my boy," he said wearily, "the law must take its course."

CHAPTER X

ALTHOUGH the news of the robbery of Mr. Sawyer's store and of Jack Gordon's arrest had spread throughout Hambletown with all the rapidity usual under such circumstances, General and Mrs. Wintringham were almost the last to learn of it. At eleven o'clock they were sitting placidly upon the front porch of Locust Cottage, alternating happy anticipations of their now rapidly approaching trip abroad with excerpts from the newspaper which the general held in his hand. Now and again they would make some reference to Molly, who had not yet awakened, having slept heavily the entire morning, in spite of her grandmother's frequent and anxious trips to her room.

At a few minutes after eleven, however, their contentment and calm were shattered by a telephone message from Mrs. Heaton, who had learned by way of the kitchen what had occurred earlier the same morning (the grocer's boy had delivered the news together with his order) and had verified it by telephoning to Mr. Sawyer. She suggested that she should come at once to Locust Cottage in order that some concerted action might be decided upon. She could not and would not believe Jack Gordon guilty, in spite of the peculiar circumstances which surrounded his capture. Undoubtedly there was some explanation which his friends might elicit.

At the first ring of the telephone Molly had opened

her eyes sleepily and had then closed them again. But there was something in the quality and position of the patch of sunlight on the floor which, coupled with the sound of the lawn mower (Ludwig never having been known to wield that implement before breakfast), made her open them a second time, in order to ascertain the time. She realized instantly what had happened, and sprang to her feet with an exclamation of dismay, slipping into her kimona and sandals. As soon as Little Mama had finished telephoning, she would signal her from the stairs to come to her room, and would then tell her the events of the night. She opened her door softly and seated herself upon the top step of the stairs, drawing the flowered silk negligee tightly around her knees. It fell away at the neck, disclosing her bare satiny throat and shoulders, over which her hair lay in long, soft curls. Her eyes glowed with mischief.

"But how could any one fairly suspect him?" Mrs. Wintringham's voice sounded incredulous.

"Yes, it is very strange that he should have refused to tell where he spent the night; that is unlike Jack."

"Dreadful beyond words! There surely must have been some mistake."

At this juncture the screen door leading upon the porch slammed, as the general, his face expressing both excitement and bewilderment, stepped into the hall.

"Yes, do. Come at once."

Mrs. Wintringham hung up the receiver and turned to her husband.

"Jack Gordon has been arrested," she said. Then the library door closed as they entered and shut themselves in.

Jack Gordon arrested!

It seemed to Molly that she must have sat for hours at the head of the stairs, clinging to the baluster for support, while her heart hammered at her side as though crying for release and her head swam. But slowly her grandmother's words began to take definite meaning, and her own connection with the mysterious misfortune which had befallen Jack came to her with a sickening shock. He had been arrested because he refused to tell where he had been the preceding night. Arrested! The word seemed to burn itself into her brain and horrid images rose before her. At this moment the man whom she loved was behind prison bars. With the realization, her body, which had been turned to lead, became suddenly supplied with wings, on which she swooped down to the floor below without seeming to touch her feet to the ground.

"I heard, Little Mama," she cried, bursting into the library, where her grandparents stood together before the fireplace, in rapid converse, their faces filled with consternation, "but it can't be. Did Mrs. Heaton say that Jack had been arrested?"

"Yes——" Mrs. Wintringham made reluctant answer. She had forgotten Molly. "Mr. Sawyer's store was robbed last night, and Jack was not at home when the officers reached his house before five o'clock this morning. His bed had not been touched." She spoke in a dry, colorless voice, which trembled slightly as she finished.

Molly's face became white. She opened her lips to speak, but no words came.

"Of course, my dear," General Wintringham's face worked painfully as he strove to control himself, "we trust Jack, and will believe in his complete innocence until he is proved guilty; but the circumstances are in-

criminating. Pray for the happiest outcome, but steel yourself for the worst. No man is perfect, and the boy was pitifully in need of money. What his temptations may have been, we cannot know. It has been discovered that his father was a thief,—died in prison, in fact. He stole large invested moneys which had been entrusted to his care. However," he assumed a brighter tone, "he has not yet been proved guilty. There is an even chance that he is innocent. We must consult with Mrs. Heaton, and, if possible, influence him to confess his whereabouts last night. She has sent for her brother."

"Oh!——" Molly's gasp was one of pain.

"Poor Jack! And only last night he said that he wanted to be as good as his father had been, and make him proud of him. He never knew." Then her mood changed and her eyes flashed fire as her womanhood awoke. In that instant of revelation she probed the depths of her own heart, and knew the divine anguish of loving. She turned accusingly upon her grandfather.

"How dare you, or any one who has known Jack Gordon, say that the chances are even for his being a thief? What has his wicked old father to do with him? Jack is the truest and noblest and best man I ever knew, and I love him. As long as I live I shall never love any other man."

Molly stood with her head thrown back and her chin raised high. She looked like some young goddess dispensing Olympian decrees.

"I can free Jack," she went on in her ringing young voice, "for I know where he was last night. He was with me, all night long until daylight. He did not steal Mr. Sawyer's miserable money, and he is a coward to

have had him arrested. I will telephone him this instant to set him free. They shall not keep him in prison a moment longer."

Molly's color flamed more brilliantly with each word, and she stood with tightly clenched hands. When she had finished she started for the library door. The telephone was in the hall. Before she could reach it, however, the general had barred the way. He was no longer an emotional old man, half weeping with sorrow and disappointment over the possible deflection of a youth for whom he had hitherto entertained affection. The anger in his face and in his voice matched that of his granddaughter, and there was sternness there as well, and authority.

"Stop!" It was as though he had said "Halt!" He raised his right hand and pointed to her with terrible accusation.

"Did I understand you to say that Jack Gordon passed an entire night in your society, not leaving you until morning?"

Molly's face whitened again and her great eyes, which had flashed lightning a moment ago, grew wide with fear. Her vision became blurred and she pressed her hands together as though in entreaty. Although she did not as yet comprehend the nature of her fault, she felt encompassed by a stifling atmosphere of wrongdoing.

"Yes," she spoke falteringly; "we were out in the pasture under the maple tree. I wanted to spend one night out of doors, to see the moon and the stars, and all the changes that take place—and the dawn."

"Jack Gordon is a scoundrel!" The general's voice boomed. "A man who would take advantage of a young girl's innocence would commit a theft. Mar-

garet," he turned to his wife, "I shall go immediately to the jail and tell that young villain what I think of his behavior. Prison is too good a place for him."

"Jack is not a scoundrel!" Molly's fear dropped from her and her voice rose. Mrs. Wintringham, whose breath was coming fast and whose face had become drawn and aged during this astonishing altercation, closed the door.

"He didn't want me to do it, but I insisted, and I made him come too. I'd have done it whether he had come or not, and he knew it. He was afraid to have me stay out alone all night. I was going to tell you about it this morning. It is I who am the cause of Jack's going to prison."

Molly's voice weakened and her body relaxed its tension as the tears came to her relief. Suddenly she realized how extraordinarily rude she had been to one whom she loved tenderly, and she was filled with compunction.

"Forgive me, Grandfather," she said, her face growing suddenly soft and childlike. "I didn't mean to be so rude, but please let me pass. I must telephone to Mr. Sawyer right away, so that he can have Jack released. He will when he knows."

But the general maintained both his position and his austerity. As Molly looked up into his face she could scarcely recognize in him the gentle, whimsical old man who had argued away so many hours over nice points in philosophy and logic. It was the face of a stern old fighter which confronted her.

"Who else knows about it?" he inquired.

"No one."

"Then no one need ever know."

Molly's color came and went, and her breast heaved

convulsively. This was the first time that she had encountered coercion. Until now her education had been entirely along lines of persuasion and argument. It seemed a monstrous thing to be arraying herself against her own grandfather. And the strangest part of it was that she was trying to do Jack a kindness—trying to assist justice. It was not just that he should be in prison for a crime which he did not commit, and it was her grandfather who had taught her to do right, regardless of consequences.

"But I must tell," she insisted patiently, as though trying to explain some knotty problem to a child. "Don't you see, Grandfather dear, that he can't escape in any other way?"

"Jack must look out for himself." The old man's voice had lost none of its insistence. "He alone is to blame. He could have prevented it, if in no other way, by informing us of your intentions."

"But what was wrong about it? Nothing could have happened to me with Jack there." Molly gazed in distress from the hard face of the old man to that of his wife, who until now had made no attempt to enter the discussion. At her granddaughter's appeal she came to her relief. It was plain that the child did not understand. In all innocence and good intent she had compassed that which had imperiled both herself and her friend. Mrs. Wintringham shrank from calling Jack her "lover," even in thought.

"Didn't you know, darling," she spoke softly, though with an effort, "that it was improper for a young girl to pass the night alone and unchaperoned, in a field, with a young man?"

"No," replied Molly haughtily. It seemed a paltry consideration,—this stickling for convention when a

man's honor was at stake, when he was languishing unjustly in a prison cell. "I consider it a very foolish convention."

"The time is over for such puerility as talk about convention." The general cast delicacy to the winds. "Are you devoid of all instincts," he inquired bitingly, "such as are usual to girls reared as you have been, which would have made you shrink from behavior such as you have been guilty of,—behavior which has brought shame upon your name and the name of Wintringham, which has stood for generations for honor and virtue? Is it your desire to become the talk of every foul-mouthed vendor of gossip in the countryside? Are you so ignorant as to be unaware that, should your disgraceful proceedings of last night become known, your reputation would be destroyed?"

Molly stood with one arm raised, as though to avoid the blows of a whip. She went cold at first, and then it seemed as though her whole body were on fire. Her face and neck crimsoned hotly.

General Wintringham stamped angrily from the room and through the hall and out to where Ludwig was cutting the grass, and gave him orders to harness old Charlie at once. It was his intention to interview Jack Gordon immediately, lest the young man's determination not to involve Molly should weaken. He was demanding of Jack no more than he would have demanded of himself. The possibility of any other course of action did not enter his mind.

The telephone rang, this time it was Mrs. von Orth, who sought denial of the strange and unbelievable report.

In the library Molly sobbed brokenly and refused

to be comforted. There could be no comfort anywhere in the world for her now.

Mrs. Wintringham knelt beside her. "Come," she said, "let us go to your room, you will catch cold, so thinly clad. Besides, Mrs. Heaton and Mrs. von Orth will be here in a few moments."

Molly rose, still with her grandmother's arm around her, and ascended to her room. She understood it all now, Jack's reluctance and his anxiety lest she should be seen before she reached the house. And he had refused to tell Mr. Sawyer where he had been the night before, in order that he might shield her. It was as though a beautiful painted curtain, representing life as the good people of the world desire it to be, had rolled back, showing behind it life as it really was, with all its grimness and pain and sorrow.

General Wintringham proceeded at once to the jail, where he easily gained access to the one prisoner that it contained. Jack was restlessly pacing his cell when he arrived. The youth had died out of his face during the two brief hours since he had been awake. The temporary surcease of suffering granted him by sleep had ended, but it had left his mind clear. He realized with terrible distinctness the position in which the events of the preceding night had placed him. His own suspicions were directed against Guy Flemming, the new clerk, whose behavior since his enrollment upon Mr. Sawyer's books had been of such a nature as to arouse his distrust. Who else could have learned the combination of the safe, which was known to Mr. Sawyer and himself alone?

When he saw his old friend, who had come so promptly to grant the support of his sympathy, a smile flooded his face, giving him for one brief moment

some resemblance to his usual self, and he put out his hand heartily to grasp the one which the general extended, but the smile died out instantly. He placed a chair for the visitor and seated himself upon the bed.

The moment was a painful one for the general. He had come to visit this young man, not so much for the sake of giving him good cheer as for seeking protection for a member of his own family. There can be little doubt that had Molly not been involved the call would have been made with equal promptness and from purely altruistic motives. As it was, however, Molly, and not Jack, was uppermost in his mind. The matter had not as yet presented itself to the general in this aspect; there had been no time for introspection and analysis of motives. He was acting as purely from impulse as Molly had done, and back of his impulse was an overwhelming fear. He could have met death and the unjust calumny of his fellows, had he himself earned it in the pursuit of righteousness, with good grace; but the slandering of any one of the women of his household—the staining of the family honor—was another matter. The affair had touched him in his most vulnerable spot. This confusion of motives robbed him of his usual heartiness.

“I am sorry to find you here,” he said, “and more sorry still for the cause. Molly has told us what occurred last night. Nothing could have been more unfortunate.”

He could not very well upbraid the young man for his part therein, inasmuch as the penalty for the indiscretion had already fallen so heavily upon him; but that he held him largely responsible was quite evident from his manner. Jack looked into his face keenly. At first he wondered whether it could be that General

Wintringham doubted his honesty, in spite of the fact that the night was accounted for; but hard upon the heels of that thought came the true explanation, and his color deepened. Evidently the old gentleman feared lest he should clear himself by incriminating Molly.

"It was a mistake for her to have told you or any one," he replied, with a dignity which outmatched the general's. "I alone am to blame, for I knew the danger to which she exposed herself. She did not. She is a child. In all probability some other way will disclose itself by means of which my innocence can be proved. It was evidently a very carefully arranged piece of work, as whoever opened the safe knew the combination. I have my suspicions and they point to an accomplice. Do not give the matter a second thought, General Wintringham."

Jack spoke slowly. He did not in any way censure the general.

At this exceedingly frank and satisfactory avowal of his attitude General Wintringham's fear and anger both subsided, leaving in their place the most genuine sympathy. The tenseness left his face, which became at once filled with kindly concern.

"I felt sure," he said, "that you would do the manly and honorable thing. Molly is, as you say, but a child and, were this to become known, an irreparable injury would result to her."

"I realize that perfectly."

"It was her desire to telephone the facts of the case to Mr. Sawyer," went on the general, "regardless of consequences, the seriousness of which she could have no way of realizing. I forbade it, and in no uncertain terms."

"Thank you, sir. You have done me a great service." Jack spoke more heartily than at any time during the interview.

Then, for the first time, Molly's declaration of her love for the young fellow sitting before him came to the general, and with especial force, for would not the unfortunate plight in which he found himself appeal the more strongly to her sympathies? It might lead her to do some rash act from which she could not retreat. Perchance, after all, Jack had proved less strong than he imagined, and had not lived up to his promise. The old man rose to his feet, looking at his watch. It was half after twelve o'clock.

"I must go, my boy," he said, "but your friends will find some way of coming to your relief. Mrs. Heaton and Mrs. von Orth are at Locust Cottage now. Mrs. Heaton has sent for her brother. She consulted with Mr. Sawyer this morning. You will receive a fair trial at the earliest possible moment, and the services of a good lawyer will be secured. Your past life will stand you in excellent stead now, and quite probably the real malefactor will be apprehended."

"Have you seen my mother?" Jack's brow contracted. She had been in his mind ever since he had awakened. Whatever resentment he had felt against her for her attitude toward himself and toward Molly had died. How far the shame and disgrace brought upon her by his father's sin were responsible for the warping of her nature it would be impossible to say. He feared the result of this second blow, the force of which he was powerless to soften.

"She went by Locust Cottage this morning," returned the general, "carrying a bag of some descrip-

tion. Mrs. Wintringham and I were on the porch, but as she did not glance up, we did not speak to her. I shall make it a point to call upon her this afternoon, and shall send you word in some way. In the meantime, keep up good heart." He was about to signal to the jailor by rapping upon the bars of the door when he turned to Jack again, as though for the expression of some afterthought.

"As a matter of course," he said, "you have not intimated to Molly your feeling for her?"

"No." Jack's answer was short, and the lines deepened about his mouth. "I realize fully that what has been discovered about my father renders any such hopes futile, even should my own name be cleared. I have no desire to saddle a disgrace upon the woman whom I love."

"Thank you, my boy; I honor you for the position which you have taken. It does credit both to your head and to your heart. Such decisions cannot but be painful, but, were they not made, greater pain would result."

When their conversation was done, however, a depression other than that which was the natural outcome of the circumstances assailed both of them, so that the old man was glad to take his departure and the prisoner was relieved to have him go. The general had gained all that he had come for. Jack was pledged to secrecy with regard to Molly's share in the escapade in which they both had indulged, and his own anxiety as well as his wife's concerning a possible love affair between them was at an end. Molly could not very well offer Jack her love unasked, or force it upon him. The boy would be set free. That was a foregone con-

clusion. Knowing surely, by reason of Molly's disclosure, that he was innocent, it did not occur to the general that it would not be so patent to every one; nor did he recall that less than two hours ago he who had been Jack's friend had said in all sincerity, "The chances are even."

CHAPTER XI

THREE weeks had passed, and it was as though a pall had fallen over Locust Cottage. The faces of its occupants had become grave and careworn, and Molly's voice no longer resounded through it in carolings and laughter. Even old Ellen lost her pleasure in the pursuit of knowledge, and spent her spare moments in sympathetic discussion of the situation with Ludwig, who showed an unwonted interest. For once he was raised out of his apathetic self-assurance, matching Ellen in the warmth of his defense.

"Dat boy not goin' to prayson," he assured her. "Everybody know he not do it." With this assertion he would straighten his back and glare with such ferocity that the greenness of his eyes would become blue.

Not once since Jack's arrest had the general launched into discussion of his favorite philosophical themes, and the meals were eaten for the most part in silence, save when one or another of the little family made a spasmodic attempt at cheerfulness. But how was it possible to be cheerful when one who had been as a loved member of the household languished in jail?

It was Molly who felt most deeply the burden of Jack's confinement. Were the day unusually warm, she suffered with him. Her limbs felt cramped and her back ached at thought of his lack of needful exer-

cise; and at night when she paced her room or knelt before her open window, gazing up imploringly into the cool, distant heavens, she pictured him also as awake and keeping sorrowful vigil. In addition to this she was oppressed by the sense of her own guilt. How could she have done such a thing? Why at nineteen had she behaved with such ignorance? Poor Jack, how hard he had tried to save her, and himself, too! The tears would force themselves from her eyes as she recalled his hesitancy in his beseechings that she should show reason in her behavior, and the delicacy which at length had compelled his acquiescence. And vividly upon the heels of this memory came that of her grandfather's scourging. She had disgraced the honorable name of Wintringham and her own name as well.

Before one week had elapsed Molly's brilliant color had disappeared and her face began to grow thin. Her eyes became larger than ever and more luminous, and were filled with a pathetic wistfulness which her grandparents found it difficult to endure; and yet she it was who all unwittingly had brought this thing to pass, and for her there could be no escape. Never were consequences more relentless, and the bitterest pain of it all lay in the fact that, although she was the sole cause of the disaster which threatened, the right to undo her own handiwork was denied her. Life pressed very hard upon her. The forces with which she had suddenly found herself in conflict, and of which she had not until now been aware, terrified her. But, most of all, she was afraid of herself, lest by lack of judgment she should injure Jack.

The excitement in the town had run higher with each succeeding day since the arrest. Not often, one

might truthfully say never, had Hambletown been so thoroughly aroused. For the most part, the people believed Jack innocent, although there were, as a matter of course, those who had "always expected something to happen," since "still waters run deep," and the lad was "too good," and there was one man who claimed to have long since predicted it. Others laid stress upon the father's crime, which affair of nearly twenty years previous was given a hearing in the local paper, thus causing the problem of heredity to become a live issue.

During this period of cruel stress Jack's years of clean living and regular hours stood him in good stead. He slept every night in his cell as soundly as he had been wont to sleep in his little room at home. No doubt the fact that his conscience was clear made sleep easier, but his waking hours were filled with anguish of mind. There were times when his father's sin seemed branded into his very flesh. It confronted him wherever he turned, shutting out vision of all else. Beside it, his own imprisonment on a false charge gave him little concern. And in addition to this there was constantly with him the fear lest Molly, in her impulsive generosity, should disobey her grandfather's orders and disclose the secret which he had used every means within his power to guard. Never a day passed that the lawyer, whom Walter Hamilton had brought from New York for his defense, did not visit him for the purpose of finding out how he had disposed of his time during the hours of that fateful night, leaving after each interview baffled, but more assured of his client's innocence, not only of the crime imputed to him, but of wrongdoing of any kind whatsoever.

Molly had importuned many times to be allowed to

go to the jail to see Jack, but she was given to understand that the following out of her unrestrained impulses had wrought sufficient havoc already, and that any violation of the injunctions laid upon her by those who were older and wiser than herself might result in untold disaster. Her open declaration of love her grandfather had ignored. He was not intentionally unkind, but knowing that, whichever way the trial turned, the relations between the two young people must cease,—since he was resolved that she should never become allied to the son of a felon,—he considered it wise not to strengthen her love either by opposition or too serious consideration, particularly when she was undergoing so profound a nervous strain.

Both the general and his wife were in strange waters. The narrow, peaceful, slow-moving stream of their daily lives had suddenly widened and deepened into a whirlpool which roared over unknown depths, and through it they were endeavoring to steer the bark of their family honor to a safe port. Not since his first outburst of outraged sentiment had the old man spoken unguardedly to the granddaughter whom he loved so tenderly and for whose future he had entertained such brilliant expectations,—expectations which had well-nigh been put an end to by her innocent, girlish prank.

Upon his return from the jail, that first day, he had taken her aside, and behind the closed doors of the library had exacted her promise of complete submission. He had pointed out to her the absolute necessity of subjecting her own will to his, and in addition had filled her with a wholesome terror of the law, which can turn the utterances of one's own lips

to one's undoing. The habit of faith in her grandfather's judgment was so strong within her, and the results of her own lack of judgment so recent, that, amid tears and protestations of regret, she had given her promise not even to discuss the matter with Hal. He, as well as Mrs. Heaton, and Eleanor, and Mrs. von Orth, and all of those who had hitherto shared her confidence, were to be kept in ignorance.

But, although Mrs. Heaton had not been told concerning the night spent under the maple tree in the general's pasture, Mrs. Wintringham considered it only honorable to disclose to her the fact of Molly's admitted love for Jack Gordon, since to the end of preventing it the trip to Europe had been planned. Mrs. Heaton, however, declared it to be more than ever a necessity. She agreed with Mrs. Wintringham and her husband that marriage with Jack had become doubly impossible. She did not believe the boy guilty, —no, a thousand times no! But the stigma of the thing would cling to him, more especially that his father's crime had become known. There were those of smaller mold who would always look upon him as a criminal. It would make little difference to them whether he were acquitted or not. Once the trial were over, he must go to some distant part of the country and begin life afresh. There were colleges in the Far West where he could gain his much-coveted education. She herself would assist him in properly locating himself, and would advance the necessary money as a loan, should he refuse it as a gift.

Mrs. Heaton's treatment of Molly now became doubly solicitous and tender, but Molly avoided her. She felt a constant desire to cry aloud her knowledge of Jack's innocence. Hal brought her daily offerings of flowers,

and fruit, and candy, and ran errands for her with untiring zeal. His boy mind stigmatized it as "mean" that Molly was not allowed to visit a friend in distress. He had taken upon his own shoulders the responsibility of calling upon Jack with greater frequency than he otherwise would have done, and had offered himself to Molly as a means of communication between them, but Molly had refused.

"I promised grandfather that I wouldn't," she had replied miserably; "but tell him that I think of him every moment, and that it doesn't matter about his father. Tell him that he isn't going to prison, because he is innocent, and God won't allow an innocent man to go to prison. God will be able to raise up witnesses for him."

But the message had added to Jack's care to such an extent that he had sent for the general and told him of it. Molly was the only possible witness whom God could "raise up," and she was subjected for a second time to rigorous commands, from which she had taken refuge in her grandmother's arms. Never had they proved a dearer haven. To her grandmother she poured out all her love for Jack, and her pain, and Mrs. Wintringham never seemed to tire of listening to Molly's account of those events which had led up to what had proved the great mistake of her life.

Early in the week following Jack's arrest, Walter Hamilton and Eleanor Mitchell had called at Locust Cottage in company with Mr. Barnard, the lawyer whom Walter had secured from New York. He was his dear personal friend as well. It was Mr. Barnard's desire to talk with those who had known Jack Gordon best, for the purpose of learning the details of his past life, for upon such considerations the defense would

be forced to rest. The boy's stubborn refusal to aid in the fight for his freedom would prove more damning than any charge which could be possibly brought against him. It was a trying discussion for the general and his wife, who, no less than Molly, were suffering keenly under the burden of their knowledge, and it would have been still more trying for Molly had she not been excluded from participation in it. During its progress she had wept wretchedly alone in her room. It seemed a travesty upon truth and justice, when all that was necessary to save Jack was to tell Mr. Barnard the simple truth concerning that night.

Meanwhile, a new excitement was caused by the disappearance of Mrs. Gordon, who had left Hambleton upon the very day of her son's arrest. She was evidently on the way to the station when General Wintringham had seen her pass Locust Cottage carrying a handbag. No one had been aware of her departure save the station-master, who had imagined, as a matter of course, that she had gone to the city for assistance in her distress and would return. She did not return, however, and the door of the cottage was found to be unlocked and swinging when, two days later, the landlord called to collect the rent. Moreover, the place was in the wildest disorder. It was quite possible that she had passed forever out of her son's life.

In spite of the fact that General Wintringham felt himself to be indubitably in the right, a strange weight oppressed him as the days lengthened into weeks, and it grew heavier as the day for Jack's trial drew near, which heaviness was shared by Mrs. Wintringham. Their minds had grown accustomed to working in ac-

cordance with certain maxims of right and wrong, which were as unimpeachable as the Commandments. To save a woman's honor at any expense, was to them a law from which they could not conceive of separating themselves. It was interwoven with the very fiber of their constitutions. History was filled with accounts of men who had gladly laid down their lives to shield a woman, to keep her name untarnished, and they had ever given to the memory of these men their applause, as they gave it even now to Jack. He was but living up to their ideals, and in so doing proving himself every inch a man. Nevertheless, their unrest grew, and more and more constantly his image, unhappy and solitary in his stone cell, hovered accusingly before them, and with each day that passed the sweetness and nobility that had always characterized him pleaded more strongly in his behalf. People began to say that the old man and his wife, who had for so many years represented the aristocracy of Hambletown, were failing, and great was the sympathy expended upon them in their time of trial, which was so evidently beyond their strength. Every one in Hambletown knew of their interest in Jack Gordon and of his intimate association with them.

Many were the family conclaves that were held, usually at Locust Cottage, since it was easier for the little group of sympathizers who had Jack's welfare at heart to gather there, than for General and Mrs. Wintringham to go elsewhere; and at these informal meetings often there were present Mr. Sawyer, whose anxiety was almost what he would have felt for his own son, and Dr. Collins, the rector, and Mr. Raeburn, and Dr. Dolliver, the family physician, who stopped for a word whenever he passed and strove in vain to

lighten the gloom by his overflowing buoyancy. And never a day passed but that one or more of these loyal friends relieved the tedium of Jack's confinement by calling at the jail during the hours when calling was permitted.

Gertrude knew nothing at all of what had happened, and was recuperating rapidly. Her golden curls grew constantly brighter and longer and her cheeks more pink, until Hal, who visited her on an average of every other day, declared she was much healthier looking and much more beautiful than before she was ill. She wondered not a little at the continued postponement of the voyage, but was satisfied with such evasive explanations as her mother chose to give her.

Jack Gordon's trial was to be held in an adjoining town, in reality a small city, where resided the proper functionaries for its conduct, and two days before the time set for the trial he was removed from the Hambletown jail to a jail near the courthouse in which it was to be held. Thus he would come before a judge who had never heard of him before, and a jury which would be impartial in every sense of the word, except in so far as they might be prejudiced in his favor by the nobility of his face and bearing. What legal evidence there was was incriminating to the last degree.

Until the moment of Jack's removal from Hambletown to Warren, Molly had faithfully obeyed her grandfather's commands, had lived up to them both in letter and spirit, and except for her one brief message communicated to him through Hal, which was no more than a message of good cheer, she had not striven to reach him in any way. Even in her own mind, rebel as she might against what seemed to her more the

cruelty of an implacable Fate than the outcome of human misjudgment, she had contemplated no act which would put to defiance parental authority. The idea that either her grandfather or her grandmother could be in the wrong, could be actuated by other than the highest of motives, did not occur to her.

It would be difficult to say just at what pressure training gives way before those elemental forces which, by their varying proportions, differentiate one individual from another; at what point the silent, cumulative oppression exerted by environment dissolves, leaving the vision purified, the mind free to carry out the dictates of its own impulses untrammelled either by its previous subservience to other minds or by fear of consequences. In Molly this awakening of latent forces within her did not take place until the actual moment when decisive action was demanded of her.

As long as Jack was in Hambletown he was among friends who were exerting themselves in every way to relieve the tedium of his captivity. Moreover, news from him as to his health and spirits reached her every day. Save for his continued absence and her actual knowledge, it was difficult to realize that anything unusual had occurred. He was innocent, he was good, and she was unaware that any one entertained suspicions concerning his probity. It was all but a technical matter. It had been necessary that some one should be arrested, but he would surely be released. "Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again." Some one had robbed Mr. Sawyer, but he would be captured soon, as a matter of course. Such were the thoughts which had made life bearable during the last weeks. She became aware of their superficiality, however, the

instant that she awoke to the fact that, entirely against his inclination, Jack had been conveyed out of the home town and placed in confinement amongst an alien, possibly a hostile, people, and that he might never return. Already were set in motion the colossal wheels of legal procedure, which might so easily grind to social death the man whom she loved, and shut him forever away from his kind.

With this realization the mist, generated by years of blind obedience to the dictates of custom, cleared away and she breathed deeply of an atmosphere charged as with magnetic fluid. The color surged up into her cheeks and her eyes regained their old brilliancy.

The childish and immature fell away from her.

Wheels could be stopped!

It took only a small clog, rightly applied, to cause the most powerful of engines to cease its operations. A human life was at stake as surely as though the electric chair stood in waiting, and a human life was of more value than adherence to a promise mistakenly given, a promise which was the outcome of habit rather than of independent reflection. She had not to choose between injuring Jack and injuring her family; no choice was offered her. She had no more power of choosing than had her forefathers when, to the salvation of their country, they had turned their back on home and wife and child.

Molly came to her decision on the afternoon of the day upon which Jack was removed to Warren, and no sooner had she done so than she mapped out a plan of immediate campaign. She must accomplish what was to be done entirely without the knowledge or consent of her grandparents. Every sign of fatigue

and anxiety had disappeared from her face, and for this reason it would be well not to encounter either one of them before they set out upon their drive. It would be sure to excite their comment, and perchance their suspicions as to her intention, for she was not apt in concealing what she felt. It was for this reason that when they entered the hall below, preparatory to ascending the stairs to make ready for their outing, Molly slipped down the kitchen stairs and into the the orchard, where she climbed into the apple tree in which she and Jack had sat upon that Sunday afternoon which seemed so very long ago, and a few moments later she saw them descend the porch and proceed slowly down the neat gravel path running from the porch to the gate, where old Charlie patiently awaited them.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN her grandparents were well out of sight, Molly emerged from her hiding-place among the green leaves and walked rapidly toward the house. She was filled with a new sense of power, which fired her brain and set the blood coursing rapidly throughout her whole body. She was alive to her fingertips. Already she seemed to have achieved that which she had planned. The responsibility for Jack's future lay, not with her grandfather, nor with her grandmother, nor even with Jack himself. No one of these could superimpose upon her, against her better judgment, that which appealed to them as right. It was an issue whose outworkings were too vital and far-reaching to allow of being hampered by petty personal considerations. It was necessary that she should judge for herself.

As she neared the porch, where Ellen sat beneath the overhanging branches of the grapevine, the old woman gazed at her in astonishment so great that she deposited a handful of the succulent young peas which she was shelling upon the floor instead of in the stew pan.

"The howly saints presarve us!" she exclaimed, "but ye look as though ye had found a diamant mine the minit. Yer as smilin' and as perky as a basket o' posies!"

"Am I smiling?" queried Molly, passing into the house as rapidly as possible, and making, as she did so, heroic endeavors to smooth out her face into sobriety.

"That ye be." Ellen nodded her head emphatically and turned again to her task.

Molly arrayed herself in her white muslin gown, paying careful attention to every detail of her toilette. It was the first time in many weeks that she had evinced the slightest interest in her appearance, but it was as though some barrier which had stemmed the tide of her natural impulses had suddenly crumbled away, whereat her life current had returned to its normal channel. As she stepped out upon the highway she looked like nothing so much as a newly opened daisy, fresh washed by the summer rain. She moved swiftly along the road leading toward the Beeches, singing softly to herself one of the Sunday-school hymns to the rhythm of which she had often marched home from church. This particular hymn, however, was one which her grandmother had sung to her when she was a very tiny little girl, and it was the first song of any description which she could remember hearing any one sing. All her life long she associated it with the sound of her grandmother's tender flutelike voice.

I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger,
I can tarry, I can tarry but a night.

Never had air seemed so exquisitely invigorating, nor the mere act of walking so delightful. Her every sense was quickened to an intense appreciation of color and sound and touch. She scarcely felt the impact of her feet upon the hard, dusty road. She was glad that Mr. Barnard was making the Beeches his home during his stay in Hambleton, and that he was Walter's friend. Under these circumstances, what more natural than that she should ask advice of Mrs. Heaton, who had disclosed to her the most suitable path to fol-

low so many times ere now. There were a variety of questions upon which even her grandfather and grandmother were in the habit of consulting Mrs. Heaton. It was highly probable that she would communicate the very important facts of which Molly was the bearer to Mr. Barnard herself, thus assuming all direct responsibility. It might even be that no trial would be necessary. How humiliating for Jack to be forced to sit before a whole room filled with curious people, while every one discussed whether he did or did not commit a crime of which he was utterly ignorant!

Engrossed with such optimistic speculations, Molly had traversed nearly half of the distance between Locust Cottage and her destination, and had reached the brook which ran over the gold-colored rocks, where she had encountered Jack Gordon on a certain Sunday long ago,—the Sunday upon which she had discovered him to be a philosopher,—when there came to her a thought which rooted her despairingly to the spot. Until this moment she had been acting upon one of her old childish impulses, regardless of the consequences either to herself or to others.

Now, however, it came to her sharply that to visit the Beeches in this unpremeditated fashion, without the knowledge of her grandparents, would place them in a most unpleasant position. Mrs. Heaton would, as a matter of course, question her with regard to their attitude, and how could she withhold the true explanation? Her visit would be equivalent to a declaration that, for purely selfish reasons, in order to shield themselves and their family from unwelcome publicity, they were deliberately suppressing evidence which, if known, would clear Jack Gordon's name from infamy.

As a matter of fact, she herself had not viewed the circumstances in exactly that light until this very moment. Thus far she had only felt, and feeling does not discriminate.

As Molly stood irresolute, leaning upon the gray railing of the little bridge which spanned the brook, a sense of bafflement overpowered her. How complicated life was! Every act, however simple, seemed fraught with consequences to some one else, either for good or evil. Until now she had thought of nothing but of getting her evidence before Mr. Barnard as quickly as possible. Beneath the bridge the water gurgled and splashed with laughing suggestion of delicious coolness, while above it stood the white-clad figure, as silent and immovable as a statue. If only, as on that morning long ago, Jack should suddenly step up beside her, how beautifully things would straighten out. He would know exactly what to do. But there was no Jack to come to her rescue to-day. Her exuberance began to lessen and the heat of the afternoon to oppress her. She could neither go on nor turn back. It was necessary that she should persevere in the course which she had adopted, but it was equally necessary that she should not lower her grandparents in Mrs. Heaton's estimation. It was at this opportune moment that a robin, balancing himself upon a twig directly over her head, began to sing, and Molly declared afterward that this was the burden of his song, rendered in the clearest and merriest and most encouraging tone imaginable:

"Write it, write it, write it. Cheer up, cheer up. Tee—hee—hee—hee. Tee—hee—hee; hee—hee."

"You darling!" Molly's laugh rang out joyously,

and Herr Robin Redbreast, having fulfilled his mission, took to his wings and flew away. Molly regarded his lessening form regretfully. "What did you fly away for? Of course, I'll write it, and I will cheer up, too. No wonder that even the birds of the air are moved to take pity on such stupidity."

Rapidly she retraced her steps to Locust Cottage, her face filled with tender raillery.

"That was the way that the birds spoke to Siegfried," she thought, "when they told him about Brunnhilde, fast asleep within her ring of sacred fire. I don't believe that they made it a bit plainer than my robin did."

She decided that she would write to Mrs. Heaton the essentials, indicating merely that she held the key to the one night of Jack's life which was shrouded, not in sleep, but in mystery. Fuller discussion could await the morrow. A man from the Beeches called each evening at the post office in the neighborhood of seven o'clock. She would tell her grandparents after the deed was accomplished, and in this way they would be prepared to meet the issue. She did not desire that they should be taken by surprise. Mrs. Heaton need never know that they had objected to having her come to Jack's rescue. The more she deliberated upon this plan the more excellent it appeared to her. Her grandfather would, as a matter of course, be wounded at her disobedience, at her broken promise, at the publicity which might—nay, must ensue; but she had sufficient faith in his justice, and in his love for her, to believe that he would forgive her once he came to realize that she had acted from a sense of duty. How could she believe otherwise, after nineteen years passed under his tutelage? Had not duty been one of the

ideals upon which General Wintringham had been most insistent?

But, in any event, she had no choice. Her grandmother would sympathize with her and comfort her if need be. Little Mama always understood.

Molly wrote a number of notes before she achieved one which satisfied her. This done, she sealed it with her gold sealing wax and started for the post office. Before she reached it, however, she had religiously thought out every possible line of development which might result from her missive, and had come to the conclusion that it was couched in such terms that the minimum of necessary harm would ensue. She had asked Mrs. Heaton to telephone her upon its reception, but not to mention the matter to her grandparents until the next morning, since such discussion before retiring would interfere with their sleep. Mrs. Heaton could draw any conclusion that she chose, without being sure of any of them. That was the beauty of writing, oh, wise little cock robin! Grandfather and Little Mama should have one more night of untroubled calm, as untroubled, that is, as the circumstances permitted, and should be well over breakfast before she made known to them what she had done. In some curious way their relations had been reversed. She felt as though they and not she were on the child plane. It was she upon whom had unexpectedly devolved the responsibility of seeing to it that they did what was right.

When she reached the little red brick post office she satisfied herself by handing the note which she had written directly to the clerk, instead of dropping it into the usual brass-bound slot.

"If by any chance," she said, "Mrs. Heaton's man

should not call for the mail to-night, will you put on this letter a special delivery stamp?" She laid a dime upon the sill of the little delivery window.

The man smiled indulgently.

"Sure I will, Miss Molly," he answered, "but you will get your money back the next time you call, because he has never once failed to come for the mail of an evening in all the years that Mrs. Heaton has lived in Hambletown. Any good news yet about young Gordon? You look so happy that I didn't know but that they'd let him out." He winked.

"There is nothing new, I believe," answered Molly, dignity creeping into her manner, although it was not possible to be very dignified with the good-natured father of one of one's girl friends. The mail clerk was Mr. Wells. His wink of intelligence and of sympathy was something quite new and not altogether pleasing.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said. "That boy never committed a theft. I'd have put Guy Flemming in jail a heap sooner than him, and not let him go strutting about town in purple silk socks and a violet tie. He makes me sick with his airs. You've been looking pretty peaked lately yourself. Genevieve will be glad to know that you are feeling better. Such things are as hard on one's friends as on one's self. But Jack'll get out all right, mark my words. Those fellows in Warren will see, once they set eyes on him, that he is not the bird they're after."

Molly passed out of the post office with a warm feeling around her heart for Mr. Wells, who, if not exactly what one might call polished, succeeded for the most part in shedding happiness upon those about him. Her feet dragged, however, as she neared Lo-

cust Cottage. Her decision and its execution had used up every scrap of reserve strength that she possessed, so that she was glad to drop into the hammock swung between two of the apple trees. In a few moments she was asleep, shielded from the little annoying beasts of the air by the canopy of mosquito netting which Jack had arranged for her.

During the evening meal her grandparents and Hal eyed her furtively. She had slept for fully an hour out in the balmy summer air, and she looked as completely well and happy as she had ever looked in her life.

"How have you employed your afternoon, darling?" Mrs. Wintringham inquired at length. She spoke casually. The change which had taken place in so brief a time astonished her. She had left her granddaughter pale and listless and heavy-eyed, to find her upon her return glowing like a red rose, yet she did not wish to precipitate her into self-consciousness by appearing to notice the transformation.

"I took a short walk," replied Molly guardedly, her eyes growing brilliant with suppressed excitement, "and then I went to sleep in the hammock. I have never known sleep to do me so much good. I felt really made over when I awoke, and I look better, don't I?"

"Indeed you do, dearie. We noticed the change at once."

"Let the good work keep on," added the general with attempted facetiousness. "That is the reward of being young." He spoke with an effort. Not since the beginning had he looked so careworn and unhappy. His cheeks had lost both their color and their firmness, and this was exaggerated by contrast with Mol-

ly's vivid youth. Hal said nothing, but sat with eyes cast down. There was upon his face an expression of disgust. His manner toward his sister had suddenly changed, and reverted to the contemptuous superiority of his little boyhood. It was well that she had not as yet noticed it.

Molly, however, was too happy over the triumphant certainty of Jack's fast approaching release to pay very close attention to her surroundings. There was only one day more to wait. Not once since she had taken the decisive step of the afternoon had there come to her a remembrance of her grandfather's words upon that morning of revelation and self-awakening, when he had made it plain to her that not only she had disgraced the family, but had jeopardized her own fair name in the community. She had suffered upon that day, and for many succeeding days, as might a woman of world experience, but she had lived for nearly nineteen years in an atmosphere of such clarity that it was not possible to shake off at a moment's notice the effect upon her, and so it happened that she had come gradually to soften the meaning of her grandfather's words, and to minimize the possibility of injury to herself. Slowly her personal suffering had merged itself into concern for Jack.

Her grandfather had spoken when under very great strain. Surely had her behavior been as extreme as he had at first felt, he would have mentioned it again. He would suffer, as a matter of course, when the affair should become known; but, she reasoned to herself, that suffering would, without doubt, grow largely out of his own mental attitude, his own exaggerated and old-school rigidity of view with regard to propriety. Surely the country folk around about could not cen-

sure her behavior. Did not all the girls return from the assembly dances with their various swains at any and every hour of the night and morning? And who but General and Mrs. Wintringham ever saw aught amiss in this pleasant though informal comradeship.

It was toward eight o'clock that there came the eagerly awaited message from Mrs. Heaton that the note had been received. Molly was sitting alone in the rose arbor, whither she had gone to conceal her suspense from the eyes of a too clairvoyant family, when Ellen's shrill voice abruptly dominated the atmosphere.

"Molly, Molly," she called, "yer wanted immejate at the telyphone!"

Molly flew to answer the summons.

"I received your note, dear," came the comforting assurance, "and I am so glad that you wrote it. Everything will be all right, of that I am positive. Suppose that I call with Mr. Barnard to-morrow morning in the neighborhood of nine o'clock. He will arrive from New York on the early train."

"That would be perfectly convenient," replied Molly, her voice trembling with excitement, as she realized the irrevocability and the inevitability of what she had done. Then Mrs. Heaton went on to say that she had motored over to see Jack that afternoon, and that he was really not so far away after all. It had taken only fifteen minutes. She had talked with the jailer, who had consented to place him in a cooler cell. He was very comfortable and courageous.

General Wintringham was a man of complex and many-sided activity. In no way had this complexity

been more markedly shown than by his successful career as an officer of distinction in the Civil War.

It was this experience which had developed in him that strain of militarism, the ability to subject the individual to the good of the whole, which after long years of lying dormant had swept over him when first he learned of the part played by his granddaughter in the lamentable affair of which Jack Gordon had been the victim. He had been wounded in his most vulnerable spot, and to the family honor he had been willing to sacrifice both Jack and Molly, even as he had been willing to sacrifice his own life, if need be, to his country. But as the days went on, this wave of ancient militarism gradually subsided, leaving him stranded not only upon the burning sands of his conscience, but a prey to the various humane impulses which, reason and pride to the contrary, inevitably guided him when the real test came.

The endangering of his family's good name had come to him with a shock so terrific that it had numbed every faculty save that of self-protection; but as he had slowly regained his normal outlook upon life, other sides of the question began to insist upon recognition, and his own behavior to assume a less worthy aspect. It dawned upon him in a moment of clear perception that he was deliberately risking a young man's future in order that he might shield himself, and the idea filled him with horror. He, General Wintringham, was afraid of what the world would say, while Jack Gordon, whom he had considered as not a fitting mate for his granddaughter, was ready to suffer its calumny in order to shield the very one who had been so largely instrumental in bringing about his misfortune.

It was midnight of the day when Molly had made

her trip to the post office that this self-illumination came to the old man, who during the early hours of the night had lain painfully awake, and he groaned aloud. Tears gushed from his eyes and wet his pillow, for this moment marked the collapse of an attitude forced upon him by his overweening pride. He felt aged and broken. His behavior during the past weeks, as he well knew, had been out of character, for character is composed of more than inherited prejudice and training. Thus far his heart had offered no resistance to his head, having been occupied with silently gathering its forces for the final struggle.

"Margaret," he whispered, "are you awake?"

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Wintringham replied. She had been aware for some time of her husband's mental suffering, but had not spoken, since there were times when he preferred to suffer alone. "I have not been able to sleep," she continued. "Think of that poor innocent boy, in a strange prison, awaiting trial for a crime which he did not commit. Henry, this thing will follow him all his days, unless he be proved innocent upon stronger evidence than that furnished by his past life. When I recall his struggles for an education, his faithfulness to the highest and best, my heart aches for him. How ironical it is that Molly, who has played such a part in his upward climb, should have been the one to render his efforts unavailing. Had it not been for that night, an alibi could easily have been proved. Henry, Jack Gordon is a very fine specimen of manhood."

"He is," the old man replied brokenly, and then his voice gathered force, "and he shall never go to prison while I live. To-morrow Mr. Barnard shall be told the true story, and the next day Jack Gordon shall

walk from custody a free man. Molly will, as a matter of course, be forced to testify, but that is the price which she must pay for her indiscretion and the price which we also must pay for our own negligence. At nineteen she should have been better informed. So far as Jack Gordon is concerned, I am not sorry for the course of events, for he has been proved as with fire. Do you realize, my dear, that in this degenerate age of self-seeking a man has been found who stands ready to relinquish all that life holds dear—honor, a brilliant future, love itself—in order to protect the object of that love? It is sublime! And to-morrow I shall visit the jail where he is confined in order to retract my objections to an immediate engagement. Although Molly is but a child, she has a woman's capacity for love, and I doubt whether she could be made to forget him. Who are we that we should ruthlessly shatter love's young dream, leaving in its place only bitter memories? You were but seventeen, if you remember, my dear, when you married me. There is no love in all the world so beautiful as the love of the young. They cannot marry at present—that is a foregone conclusion; but the boy will succeed all the more quickly if he has an object for which to work—and such an object!"

The old man's voice filled with pride, as he paused a moment, to continue immediately, "My dear, Molly is fit to grace a palace, but if an all-wise Providence ordains that she shall grace instead the fireside of a poor man, far be it from us, who live in this great and glorious country where all men are created equal, to throw against it the weight of our disapproval."

He ceased speaking, and peace encompassed him, the first that he had known in many a day. When after

several moments his wife had not replied, he spoke again:

"What are your sentiments, my dear?"

After a moment more of silence Mrs. Wintringham made answer in a very soft voice, while her hand sought that of her husband:

"I am so glad, Henry. Your attitude is a noble one, the more that you have suffered so keenly over the affair. I agree with you entirely."

"Ahem!" The general cleared his throat so loudly that Molly, lying awake in her own room, heard him. She had fallen asleep immediately upon retiring, from sheer exhaustion as well as relief; but thoughts as to the consequences of her act, and its probable reaction upon her grandparents, were unpleasantly at work in her subconsciousness. She found herself wide-awake quite suddenly, and a moment later heard the clock in the library chime the quarters and then strike twelve. For herself she did not fear; but grandfather and Little Mama would be forced to suffer, in their own minds at least, all the rest of their lives. Not long after the chiming of the clock, her door being open, she heard her grandfather's "ahem!" and then the murmur of voices. Her heart smote her as though already she were the cause of mischief. She tiptoed to their door and called softly:

"Are you ill, Little Mama, or is Grandfather ill?"

"No, dear," came the reply; "why are you not asleep?"

"I can't sleep." Molly voice sounded desperate.

"Poor baby!" Mrs. Wintringham spoke softly, and then, "Go back and try again, darling. It will come."

"All right," returned Molly. "Good-night."

When all was quiet Mrs. Wintringham spoke again,

but in a still smaller voice than the one in which she had first addressed her husband. "Henry——"

"What is it, my dear?" The old man's voice had its accustomed ring, albeit it was subdued to a pitch suited to the hours usually dedicated to slumber.

"Henry, I have an admission to make."

"What is it, my dear?"

"I fear that it will displease you."

"Nothing that you are capable of doing could displease me," replied her husband gallantly, giving her hand another squeeze.

"I could no longer endure the thought of Jack's danger," continued Mrs. Wintringham, her voice becoming hardly audible, "and so—and so—yesterday I told Mrs. Heaton the entire story, omitting nothing. She called during the morning when you were in the field. I explained that it was desirable for Molly's sake, as well as our own, not to make use of the evidence unless the trial gave unmistakable signs of going against Jack. I did not allow her to imagine for one moment, however, that you intended permanently to withhold the information. There will arise an occasion for discussing the situation on the morrow. I had decided to make known what I had done upon our awaking in the morning, that you might not be taken by surprise."

She ceased, and once again silence reigned, to be broken by:

"Henry, you are not displeased by this seeming defiance of your authority?"

"Displeased!" General Wintringham rose to a sitting posture, and his voice rang out triumphantly. "You are the noblest woman that God ever created. You have acted in accordance with your own unerring

sense of right. Would that I had seen as clearly! But it is the woman-soul which must ever lead man upward and onward, toward the heights. Man, my dear, is prone to be led astray by the grosser considerations of life, chief among which is the esteem of his fellows."

Mrs. Wintringham sighed with content as she answered:

"Having lived the greater part of my life in close companionship with you, my dear, I have absorbed somewhat of your high ideals. Knowing you so well, I felt assured that you would take the course of action which was in accordance with the most impartial justice, regardless of consequences which, as a matter of course, we cannot but deplore. Molly is young, and I trust will outlive unkind criticism; at all events, the trip abroad will remove her from whatever immediate unpleasantness there may arise. I feared lest you might not disclose the facts in time to effect Jack's release at the trial."

At this juncture there came a knock at the door, accompanied by Molly's voice, petitioning entrance.

"Poor child," Mrs. Wintringham said, under her breath, and then, "Come in, dear."

So Molly entered and stood beside her grandfather, who was once more resting comfortably upon his pillow.

"Grandfather dear," she said, her voice quavering, "I couldn't sleep because I've done something dreadful. I'd have waited until morning to tell you if it were not that I knew that you were awake, too. I had to do it, for it was right, and you always said that one must live up to one's own sense of right, no matter what any one else thought.

"I wrote a note to Mrs. Heaton this afternoon, and told her everything. She will tell Mr. Barnard, and they will be here to talk with you at nine o'clock. I didn't say so, but I allowed her to think that you knew I was writing the note and approved. It was right, Grandfather dear, for it was true, and we must try not to mind what happens. I ought to be the one to bear it all—I'm sorry that you must, too—but I am sure that people won't say anything—anything horrid—as you thought at first, because it was such a little thing, and all the girls go home at night with the boys—and it wasn't so very different. I had to come and tell you, for I love you so, and I can't bear to have you angry with me."

The sweet girlish voice grew husky as Molly sank to her knees beside the bed and buried her face in her grandfather's neck. At first he said nothing, seeming bereft of the power of speech by sheer surprise, if by nothing more, but he stroked her head with trembling hands. At length he said, in a voice that was filled with tears:

"The Lord's hand is in this. Thank God that I have lived to see this day! that I have as wife and as granddaughter women of such lofty and noble nature that they have dared to defy me and my rightful authority in the pursuit of their duty. Molly, my child, your dear grandmother and I decided not many moments since that such a course was the proper one to pursue. We could not allow an innocent man to go to prison, or even to risk going to prison, while we knew the truth, whatever suffering the pronouncement of that truth might bring to ourselves. Moreover, my child, I have something more to add, which may be of interest to you. Sometime before the lamentable oc-

currence upon the night of the robbery, Jack Gordon, than whom I know no finer man alive, asked me for your hand in matrimony. At that time it seemed wise to relegate all such considerations to the future, inasmuch as he is not now in a position to support a wife, and has, moreover, his education to acquire; but I have reversed my decision. If it be your wish, and I gather from your own assertion that such is the case, you and Jack may become formally engaged as soon as he is set at liberty."

"Grandfather darling!"

Molly's cry of joy was drowned upon her grandfather's breast. "Oh, you are so—so good, so kind! Now I shall sleep! Good night, Little Mama, dearest. Of course, you meant to do it all the time, only you were not quite ready. I wish that I had waited."

Molly kissed both of her grandparents many times, and then left them. For over an hour she knelt before her window. The same kindly stars that smiled down their benediction upon her were keeping watch over Jack as well.

CHAPTER XIII

"IT IS the strangest explanation that I ever ran across."

Tom Barnard threw one leg over the other and lighted a fresh cigar. He and Walter Hamilton were sitting on the balcony which adjoined Walter's studio, Mrs. Heaton having retired. It was the night before the trial. Barnard was about his host's own age, but of an opposite type. He was short and thickset, with broad shoulders. His heavy black hair was as straight as an Indian's, and his bright brown eyes, although they twinkled humorously, gave, nevertheless, the impression of taking in every detail of their surroundings. The man breathed power and made one feel instinctively that, now that he had come, something was about to happen; nor was the feeling apt to be a mistaken one. Something did happen as a rule when Tom Barnard was called upon to assist, and happen for the better.

"By Jove!" He slapped his knee softly. "She was the prettiest thing this afternoon when she told me that crazily improbable tale. She had about her such an air of innocence, and at the same time of assurance. I don't suppose that she ever once thought of its being doubted. If I hadn't heard her tell it myself, and, what is more to the point, seen her tell it as well, I'd never have given it serious consideration,—that is, as to its truth. It does not sound normal."

"Her friends can quite understand how it happened." Walter's voice was dry. "One would have to know both of them," he added.

"I am not casting reflections either upon Miss Hastings' character or her veracity," Barnard hastened to assure him. "The whole affair is Arcadian and Utopian to the last degree, but the atmosphere of it is too rarefied for the court-room. Personally, I believe every word that she uttered, bless her; she is a plucky little girl. But it is upon her own personality and the impression of truth which she will create that the verdict will hang. Were it not for that, I'd have small hope of succeeding on the strength of her evidence. The boy, too, will make an appeal. The jury in Warren will be more open to such influences than would a New York jury. In the very nature of the case there could be no corroborative testimony."

Barnard puffed for a few moments silently at his cigar and looked about him. The night was one of exceptional beauty. It was just such a night as the one during which Molly and Jack had sat side by side beneath the maple in the general's pasture.

"Did you ever see such eyes!" The lawyer's mind still ran on Molly. He was talking more to himself than to his companion. But suddenly he turned to him with a little laugh.

"Walt," he said, "if I had not seen Miss Mitchell, and did not know that you are the happiest man alive, I'd believe that you were in love with that little girl of the general's. It was she who sat for 'Youth Triumphant,' wasn't it?"

"Yes." Walter's face, showing dimly in the moonlight, gave no sign of emotion. "Yes," he answered, "she was quite a child then, and a wonderful child.

It is an arrant shame that she must be plunged into such unmerited publicity."

"It is," Barnard acquiesced with considerable vehemence, "and I wish with all my heart that it might be avoided. There is small chance of that, however. What a magnificent old aristocrat the general is! Do you know, Walt, I am under the impression that he has had this information up his sleeve from the first, and only made up his mind to use it at the last moment. That would account for Miss Hastings' evident suffering, as well as for her changed manner toward you and your sister. She had been forbidden to tell you the true story. I've encountered his kind before. No doubt he would have preferred to be drawn and quartered rather than allow his granddaughter to mount the witness chair."

"That explanation is a plausible one," Walter admitted, "and yet, from what I know of the old man, I can't believe that he would deliberately withhold facts such as these."

"Granted." Barnard still clung to his position. "But this time his decision came with a struggle. Do you realize what the thing will mean—newspaper notoriety, gossip, etc.?"

"The family will leave for Europe immediately the trial is over. We shall all sail together."

"I'm glad of that." Barnard's reply was hearty. "But what of the boy?"

Walter paused before he answered.

"He will have to live the thing down, I presume," he said at length. "Miss Hastings' testimony will, no doubt, clear his name. No mere gossip can affect him. He has refused all offers of assistance. As you know, he has already made preparations for entering

college in the fall. He will not consider a Western university, as my sister suggested. I must confess that I am glad that his mother is out of the way."

"I have an idea that all who knew of their relations are glad." Barnard rose to his feet and took a turn about the balcony. "But I never saw any one more cut up than he was when I told him of her death. He seemed to feel in some way responsible for it, in spite of the verdict of the authorities at Bellevue that her insanity had been of long standing. That knowledge, while it relieved him, seemed to wipe away the memory of her harshness. It furnished an excuse. What a pity that in her frenzy she should have spread the report of his father's crime. It was so utterly unnecessary. Why could he not have been spared that?" He resumed his seat.

Walter made no direct reply, instead he said, "Do you entertain serious fears that in the absence of corroborative testimony Miss Hastings' story may carry no weight?"

"There is that possibility, though I am optimistic. In New York it would be regarded as the trumped-up tale of a young girl to shield her lover. I presume that, as a matter of fact, they are in love. What but love could make a man, whose entire career is at stake, risk prison? Perchance he is fine enough to take such a stand out of pure chivalry, but I incline to the other theory. And the note which Miss Hastings sent your sister but confirms my opinion. At the time it was written she could not have known of her grandparents' disclosure to Mrs. Heaton earlier in the day, otherwise it would have been unnecessary. No, the girl wrote it in out-and-out defiance of authority. She meant to save him, whether or no. No doubt

the old people told her of their decision soon after she had committed herself, so that all ended well."

Walter laughed good-humoredly.

"Go on," he said, "I am interested." He had always declared that his friend was cut out for a detective rather than for a lawyer. His theories had been so universally proved correct that he no longer questioned them.

"No doubt you are right," he admitted, "down to the last detail."

"They are in love with each other, are they not?" Barnard put the question suddenly, after an interval of silence, and Walter started slightly.

"I have often thought that they were." His voice gave evidence of the strain to which the conversation was subjecting him, and his friend, peering intently at him through the shadows, began to understand, as friends do sometimes understand. It would not be an unnatural outcome of the intimacy which had existed for such a length of time between the two families. It might explain why Walter had not married earlier in life, as well as why he was marrying now. He changed the subject.

"There is just a chance that there may be no trial."

"No trial, what do you mean? Has the real thief been apprehended?" Walter's feet came down from the railing with a sounding thud.

"No, but a man was captured last night who had been operating in a town out near the end of Long Island. He is believed to be one of a clever gang of thieves on whose track the police have been for a long time." Barnard spoke deliberately. "I've done a little investigating on my own account, for I mean to save that boy."

He laughed apologetically as he made his confession. Not only had he refused a legal fee for his services, but he had expended his own money in Jack's behalf. "Jack Gordon is," he continued, "the chap that I have been looking for. I want him in my office. If all goes well, I shall offer him a position with me. I can make his work during the first four years sufficiently light to enable him to attend the New York University night classes. In that way he will be earning a good salary by the time he graduates. It depends merely upon his own inclinations. Should they be toward law, and he has the legal mind unless I am greatly mistaken in him, his future is already as assured as that of any of the bright boys now entering the law school."

He paused to knock the ashes from his cigar. Mention of his plans for Jack had deflected the conversation from its original course, although neither of them were aware of it for several moments.

"I am glad, more than glad." Walter spoke heartily. Barnard was planning Molly's future as well as Jack's, and that his planning was intentional his next words showed.

"Can't you imagine him going through years of poverty and struggle with her toiling beside him? A girl who would write that note in the face of family opposition,—who would offer herself as witness with that particular story to tell, would do it. His father's crime, which will always be associated with his name, will be a sufficient cross for them to bear. I can save them the rest."

"It might prevent them from marrying altogether. General Wintringham has already stated his position quite frankly. Since you have guessed so much, you

might as well know it all. Although there is no engagement between them they are, as you suggested, in love with each other. It has occasioned her family much uneasiness. It was for the purpose of separating them that the trip abroad was planned."

"I see," nodded Barnard slowly; "but other plans were in progress into which it did not fit, so it was cast aside as easily as a cork might be by the waves."

"The plan still holds."

"Yes, but, having gone through this ordeal together, to what purpose save the pleasure of foreign travel will it be?"

"Of none, possibly."

Barnard laughed.

"Right you are," he said. "Nothing will prevent Miss Hastings from marrying Jack Gordon, should she make up her mind to do so—unless——. By Jove, that's where the rub will come—unless the lad himself refuses her. He is quite capable of that. The old gentleman would not scruple to lay his wishes before him either."

"What about the man captured yesterday on Long Island?" Walter brought his friend back to the subject from which he had been turned aside, and Barnard, seizing the broken thread of his discourse, continued:

"There is a curious likeness between this affair and a series of robberies which have been committed over a considerable area of the Eastern States during the past year. In each case the safe was opened without resort to force, and suspicion was directed against one of the old and trusted employees. There was also in each case a new name upon the payroll. I suspect Flemming. My own theory, and so far it is only a

theory, is that a group of men, having affiliations with safe-makers, learn the combinations of various safes as they are manufactured, and then, by locating these safes after they are sold, send out members of their own gang as clerks. When any one of these men is successful in obtaining a position, a robbery occurs. Flemming's alibi was almost too pronounced to be entirely unpremeditated. The man captured on Long Island was shot and lies in a hospital at this moment in a dying condition. Criminals often make an *ante-mortem* confession. My detective is there and has made arrangements for taking any advantage that may present itself. If I am correct in my surmises, and news reaches us in time, little Miss Molly will be spared the ordeal with which she is confronted. We have still nine or ten hours before us. At any moment a telegram may arrive which will empower me to clap Guy Flemming into irons and set Jack Gordon free. I did not mention the matter sooner because I dislike to arouse false hopes. However, the telegram which reached me this evening pointed toward success. What a scheme! Each time the confidant has been chosen to resemble some one of the employees. But they did not reckon on the shooting."

In another moment the men would have left their positions on the balcony and have sought well-earned repose. Barnard was only waiting to finish his cigar. Suddenly, however, there reached their ears the muffled pat of feet upon the lawn, followed by a sibilant whisper. Barnard removed his cigar from his lips and pressed its lighted end against the railing. Both men leaned forward and stared intently down into the shrubbery through which wound the white ribbon of road, its pebbles shining in the long slanting rays of

moonlight. Whoever was there had approached over the grass. As they gazed, a slender figure stepped boldly into view.

"Mr. Hamilton." The words were spoken quite audibly, although not in a loud tone, and Walter at once recognized the speaker.

"Is that you, Hal?" he called.

"Yes."

"Go to the side door. I will let you in."

Walter rose as he spoke and left the balcony, to return in a few moments accompanied by Hal, who was breathing heavily, as though laboring under some excitement. Had it been light enough to see them, an observer might have noticed that for once his eyes resembled his sister's.

CHAPTER XIV

THE court-room was very much like any other large room. Molly had supposed that a spot dedicated to the dispensing of justice would be in every respect different. It was long, high-ceiled, with white-washed walls, and row after row of movable benches, like those in the Hambletown assembly rooms,—benches which could be cleared easily away for the weekly dances,—not, however, that anything so frivolous as a dance could take place amid the austerity of the courthouse. That was inconceivable. In one respect alone was the room out of the ordinary. The northern end terminated in a platform, raised perhaps a foot above the floor. It was fenced off by a railing, beneath which, on the main floor, sat four men around a table, busily scribbling upon pads of yellow paper. These were reporters, but Molly did not know that, as she sat uncomfortably aloft upon the red-cushioned, ecclesiastical-looking chair at the center back of the large platform, on a small platform of its own. To one side of her sat the judge, a benevolent-looking, white-haired man, and near by at a long table Sheriff Judkins, Mr. Barnard, and the thin man with a keen, unpleasant face, who had stated the case for the State.

Jack's bearing, when he entered the court-room, had impressed every one. Never had he carried his head higher, nor walked more unflinchingly. Only once did

his expression change, and that was when General Wintringham, who occupied a seat near the front, gallantly concealing whatever discomfort his approaching notoriety was causing him, bowed and smiled with his old geniality and a lofty self-assurance. It was a different sort of smile from any which he had bestowed upon the prisoner during his stay within the jail of Hambleton. And upon Mrs. Wintringham's face, too, was a triumphant serenity. She also bowed and smiled. Molly was not with them, but then he had especially requested that she should not attend the proceedings.

The room was filled to overflowing long before the trial opened. Fully a half of the audience was comprised of Hambletonians. Mrs. Heaton sat with the Wintringhams, and just behind them were Eleanor Mitchell and Walter Hamilton. Mrs. von Orth was there, too, and Dr. Collins, with his wife and Raymond, who, although a young man, was as thin of body and as fat of face as ever. He had just finished his first year at the divinity preparatory school. Mr. Sawyer was there, and also Dr. Dolliver.

Hal had not accompanied his grandparents to the front of the house, but had taken up his position upon the doorstep. When, however, Molly entered from the little anteroom, which had been reserved for her special use, since all the other witnesses were men, he was standing against the rear wall.

Until a few moments before the opening of the defense Jack had been unaware that Molly was to testify, and her absence from the court-room did not tend to arouse his suspicions. It had seemed best to Mr. Barnard that, since there was that last chance in a hundred of the timely arrival of the telegram, he

should not be told until the morning of the trial. It would only serve to excite his opposition and secure for him a bad night. It was for the same reason that the general had not visited the jail in Warren the day before, for the purpose of withdrawing his objection to Jack's suit. The boy might not consent willingly to saddle disgrace upon her whom he loved.

Mr. Barnard had intended to prepare his client for Molly's testimony as soon as he reached Warren, the next morning, which was to be a good half-hour before the time set for the opening of court; but a punctured tire, combined with an unfrequented road, which did not, after all, prove to be a short cut, delayed him to such an extent that he reached the courthouse but a few moments in advance of the judge. Walter had brought him over in his runabout. It was not until the prosecuting attorney was speaking that he remembered his omission, and leaning close to Jack's ear, told him in as few words as would serve to convey the intelligence that Miss Hastings would be the first witness for the defense. He averted his eyes, that he might not see the effect of his communication.

Jack gazed down again at the satisfied faces of the general and his wife, and the hot color surged up into his face. Molly was to tell the story of their night together out of doors! His heart began to beat frantically, so that he heard not a word of what the prosecuting attorney was saying, and though he experienced anger and alarm as well, through them both ran a wild joy, which would not be quieted. Although he had exerted himself to the utmost to prevent this from occurring, forces beyond his control had rendered his struggle futile. His joy, however, was not because Molly's testimony would free him, not that; he had not

yet thought of that; it was because love had triumphed,—her love for him. Her action was not the result of childish impulse, born of ignorance,—as had been her first confession to her grandparents,—but the outcome of a deliberate war upon the general, which had included his conquest, for there he sat without a sign of uneasiness or disapproval. It did not occur to Jack that General Wintringham had undergone a voluntary change of heart.

Then, before he could accustom himself to the thought of what was to take place under his very eyes, Molly was ascending the platform. After one glance at her sweet, glowing face, from which love had swept away every sign of nervousness, Jack cast his eyes down and sat as one turned to stone. Molly had never looked more beautiful, and her apparel, chosen for its simplicity, enhanced her youth. She wore a collarless dress of embroidered white linen and a hat of the same material. There was no touch of color in her costume, but this served to emphasize the brilliancy of her cheeks, lips, and eyes. Never since it had been painted had she more closely resembled Walter's prize picture. She was "Youth Triumphant."

When it was announced that Miss Margaret Hastings would be the first witness for the defense a thrill of expectancy ran through the audience. They had not anticipated this. They felt well repaid for their coming. And then Molly told the story of the night during which the robbery had been committed. Her words were of her own choosing, although she had been drilled by Mr. Barnard the greater part of the preceding afternoon, that she might leave nothing to the imagination of the listeners, more particularly to the imagination of the jury. After a few preliminary

questions she was allowed to tell her story with little interruption.

She detailed at some length Jack Gordon's previous relations with her family, his frequent visits for the purpose of studying with her, their mutual love of poetry, her own enjoyment of night and her desire to spend one entire night out of doors. She showed this desire to have been aroused by certain poems which she had read. She told of the afternoon in the apple tree when she had persuaded her friend, against his better judgment, to be her companion, as well as of her determination not to acquaint her grandparents with her purpose until it had been accomplished. Of the night itself she said little, save that they had watched and enjoyed the various changes which had taken place, and that she had gone to sleep toward morning, leaning against the tree. Her companion had awakened her as soon as it was light, and they had returned to their respective homes.

The audience, including the judge and jury, gave breathless attention, carried out of themselves for the time being by the beauty and simplicity and evident sincerity of the narrator, as well as by the unusual character of the evidence. There were many wet eyes among them, especially among the women, who well understood what the telling would mean afterward to the young girl who now spoke so directly and unfalteringly.

Against the rear wall Hal continued to stand, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. Gone were the arrogance and contempt which had been evident in his behavior the day before.

If the matter had ended there, the jury would have had little difficulty in coming to an immediate conclu-

sion; but as it was, there was the prosecuting attorney to be dealt with,—the thin man with the lean soul,—and he forthwith rose for the cross-examination. He was the only person in the room who had remained unmoved.

"Are you sure," he queried, a peculiar and suggestive intonation in his voice, which matched the leer upon his face, "that this occurrence took place upon the night of the twenty-eighth of June?"

"Yes," replied Molly.

"Are you in the habit of keeping trysts at night with young men?"

"I protest." Mr. Barnard was on his feet in an instant, red and angry. The general's face blazed and a rustle of disapproval ran through the court-room. Over Molly's features spread a look of pain.

"No," she answered. She did not realize that the question had been put for the purpose of confusing her, or that it had been ruled out before she had made reply. In the back of the room a woman laughed unpleasantly. At the sound of the laugh Jack's lips tightened and his nostrils distended.

Mr. Jones had made a mistake; he saw it in the faces of the jury; but he had attained his object, he had caused the witness to be nervous. Her breath came more quickly and the eagerness died out of her face. Then followed a rapid succession of questions, relating chiefly to the time at which Jack had reached the maple tree, and when he had left it. Mr. Jones scored only one point, which was that presumably at three o'clock, the time at which the robbery had been committed, the witness had been asleep and had slept for nearly two hours. However, as it was scarcely possible that her companion could in that time have reached the village,

secured and secreted his booty, and returned to the pasture, the point was scarcely worth emphasizing.

Molly had become tense during the ordeal, and her face grave, but her eyes had grown wider and more appealing with each question. However, she had not been made to retract, or alter any of her previous statements. It was unfortunate that there was no witness to the truth of what she said—could be none in the very nature of the case. The least gifted among the audience saw the incompleteness of the testimony. Already Mr. Jones' initial question had begun to have its way in the minds of a certain few, the few who are always open to unpleasant suggestion. A very charming girl might, with the aid of a clever lawyer, construct such evidence were it to save her lover from prison, and with whom did young girls keep trysts save with lovers? And would she not be doing a praiseworthy act by so defending him? No doubt she had spent a night under the maple tree, but what night?

"Bet cher she's his girl," whispered one country lad to another, to which his companion made reply:

"Ain't she the peach, though? I'd have stole ten thousand dollars for her if I could have got away with it."

Admiration for the witness grew apace, as well as sympathy, and both emotions included the prisoner as well as the witness. Never had there been a more interesting combination upon that particular platform. What would not a man do for love of her, and in return, what would not a girl do for love of him? Jack was no less handsome that his face had grown thinner and his tan had disappeared. She was willing to risk all, her good name, if need be, to save him. And right

here those most austere minded began to whisper skepticisms among themselves.

"A scandalous thing it was for a girl to have done."

When Molly left the witness chair her assurance had deserted her, and the bright color had left her face. In some way the evidence by means of which she had so confidently expected to secure Jack's release had fallen short of the mark. No one had ever doubted her veracity before. She was the only one who knew the truth, with the exception of Jack, and if Mr. Jones would not believe her sworn testimony, surely he would not believe Jack either.

Molly did not return to the small room wherein she had awaited her summons to the witness chair, but took her place beside her grandparents. So it had been prearranged. She would not be called upon again. They both smiled at her when she returned to them and her grandmother took her hand in hers; but that they had suffered with her and for her was evident in their faces. Molly dared not look at Jack, who sat with his hand covering his eyes. But her thoughts were sharply interrupted by a name which at that moment was as far removed from her thought as the East from the West.

Mr. Barnard, it seemed, had a second witness, and in another moment Ludwig Jensen, poor, ramshackle Ludwig, stoop-shouldered and shambling as to gait, his cheeks redder than they had been before in his life, his white eyelashes clinging to them so closely that an onlooker could not but wonder that he was able to find his way, swayed himself clumsily into the witness chair, after one unsuccessful attempt to reach it. He had been held up in his first effort by the judge, who had said, "Take the oath!" in tones of such determi-

nation that Ludwig had fairly leaped into the air, which unlooked-for display caused great merriment among those inclined to hilarity. He understood what the judge meant, however; he had not remained at the Beeches until morning for nothing.

The oath was administered to him and he was shortly seated upon the red velvet throne whereupon so many others had writhed. But Ludwig did not writhe. He sat comfortably and complacently, raising his eyes now and again to steal a glance at General Wintringham and Mrs. Wintringham and "Mays Molly," whose face expressed the acme of amazement and concern. There could be but one explanation, as a matter of course. Ludwig must have seen the pair in the field on that fatal night, in spite of all their precaution, and then Molly suddenly remembered that upon that night she had heard a noise behind the bushes.

God had raised up a witness at the last moment, to set Jack free.

CHAPTER XV

NOTHING could have been more unexpected or more startling than the sudden appearance of Ludwig Jensen as a witness in the court-room of Warren, but Ludwig it was who had lain close to the roots of the blackberry bushes upon that night of unhappy memory; hence, who but Ludwig was there to vouch for the truth of all that Molly had said? He vouched, indeed, for the truth of much more than she had said, beautiful happenings concerning which she would never have thought of telling, but which made the story complete.

Ludwig had not divulged the secret of his night's vigil immediately upon hearing of Jack Gordon's arrest, even though his knowledge wrought him into an unaccustomed fury of excitement. Dolt he might be, but he was at the same time sufficiently a gentleman not willingly to make known anything which "Mays Molly" evidently desired to remain unknown. Besides, she had said that she herself would tell her grandmother. For this reason he held his peace.

As, however, the final day drew nigh, and to his best knowledge the true events of that night remained hidden, the burden of his experience had grown too heavy for his shoulders alone, and he had endeavored to lighten it by sharing it with Hal, his usual confidant. That he had done well to share it became apparent at once, for Hal had forthwith removed the burden en-

tirely from Ludwig's shoulder to his own. When, at length, he had established in his own mind the accuracy of all that Ludwig affirmed, and had traversed inch by inch the route to the maple tree, stooping down at the end to peer between the stems of the blackberry bushes, through which Ludwig had gazed for so many aching hours, rage had swelled up within his breast—rage against his sister. Molly was a coward! She was going to let Jack Gordon take his chances!

If Hal had resembled his sister in the matter of temperament, the wrath pent up within him would have exploded then and there. He would have sought out its object without delay and have expressed himself in no uncertain terms. Hal, however, was not like Molly. He was by nature a diplomat, and he hated scenes. Provided the facts were known to Mr. Barnard before the trial, he reasoned, what mattered it how soon before? The lawyer was then in New York, having gone there on one of his numerous flying visits, and would not return until early the next morning. Hal could not, if he desired to keep the affair private, usher Ludwig into his presence until the following night. Hal had not the slightest intention of raising a storm at Locust Cottage. He would arrange matters in such a way that no one would know anything about it until the last moment. Upon the very morning of the trial, Mr. Barnard himself, and no less a one in authority, should inform the cowardly Molly that her guilty secret had been discovered and would be made use of to set Jack Gordon free. The despised Ludwig should be the means. That would serve her exactly right.

Hal experienced the greatest difficulty in treating his sister with even ordinary civility, which change in

his bearing must have become apparent to her had it not been for her own preoccupation. During the next day he was moody and ill at ease, spending a considerable amount of time in his room. It was after eleven o'clock when he and Ludwig had stolen as noiselessly away on their midnight errand as had Molly some weeks before. Thus it came about that every member of the Wintringham family, each independently of the other, arrived at the selfsame conclusion and took action upon it.

It all seemed a long time ago to Hal as he stood in the rear of the hall listening to Ludwig's halting replies, given, each after considerable thought, in broken English. His eyes were bright with satisfaction, not only in the value of Ludwig's testimony, but because, after all, Molly had lived up to his ideal of her. When he had found out the night before that she was to testify, he had suggested to Mr. Barnard that neither she nor his grandparents should know of Ludwig's intended testimony, inasmuch as the knowledge that she had been watched during that night, and that the watcher was to appear as witness, might serve to confuse her. To this the lawyer had agreed.

"Where were you upon the evening of the twenty-eighth of June?" Mr. Barnard asked.

"In may room," replied Ludwig, raising his white eyelashes for a moment. He was endeavoring to answer as he had been instructed.

"How long did you remain there?"

"To nare ten o'clock."

"Why did you leave it?"

"Aye hare der harse keck."

"Did you go into the barn?"

"Yaas."

"How long did you stay there?"

"Aye don' know."

"What did you do after you had attended to the horse?"

"Aye stad out en der yard to say der stars. Dey bane pretty."

There were some in the court-room who smiled at this, others who laughed outright.

"How long did you stay there?"

"Ven Aye say some von come tru der vay baytween der barns, Aye stod clos' to der vall."

"Who was it?"

"Mays Molly."

"Miss Hastings, you mean?"

"Yaas."

"Did you know her then?"

"Yaas."

"Was it moonlight at that time?"

"Naw. Shay come clos' an' Aye say her coat. It vas over her hade, lake shay vare en vinter."

"Tell what happened after that."

"Aye follow after her, ver' sof'."

"Why did you follow her?"

"Aye 'fraid for her out en der dark alone."

"Why did you not speak to her?"

"Shay not lake it to know Aye follow her."

"What happened then?"

From this point on Mr. Barnard allowed Ludwig to relate his story without interruption for some time.

"Shay go en von side of der blackberry bush an' Aye go on odder side on sof' grass by der vater. Aye mek no soun'. She go on to der beg tree en der pasture, an' shay say, 'Zjack?' He say, 'I don' lake it,

you come out hare. You mus' go home ven et es fairst layght.' "

Which showed that, although Ludwig had not a perfect command of English, nevertheless, he had caught the drift of Jack's greeting.

"Aye lay don' clos' to der bushes an' look trou hole in baytween 'em. Aye say bot' ver' soon. Day stan' by der sides. Shay say:

" 'Don' scol'. Aye to blame. Aye tell Aye don' it.'

" 'You not don' it,' hay say, and den, 'You mus' nat tall no vons but you grammudder dat you come.' Shay say, 'Aye ver' happy, air you happy?'

"Hay say, 'Yaas.'

"Den dey set do'n an' not say mooch, but et get layght a ver' leetle, an' Aye say 'em more. Shay say shay glad shay not come alone. Hay ask her ef shay vant a star, an' say dat von es hang on aind of tray branch. Shay laff an' say shay do vant von. Aye mek leetle noise looken to say it. Shay har may an' grow 'fraid, an' hay come an' look ver' Aye vas, but Aye steck clos' 'en shadow, an' hay not say may. Hay not look mooch baycause hay tenk no von dere. Hay laff at her.

"Den dey hare a noise of vild anemal, an' shay scaired. Shay say shay glad shay not alone. Hay say hay glad, too. Den shay say shay mus' er ben a funny leetle gel, ven he know her long ago. Hay say she nise leetle gel, always doing goot for some von."

"How long did you remain lying under the bushes?"

Mr. Barnard interrupted the flow of Ludwig's narration, for he was evidently embarked upon a subject which gave him pleasant recollections. His eyes

had turned from green to blue, and so forgetful of his audience had he become that he had long since neglected to lower his eyelids. He was gazing at the ceiling in a sort of ecstasy. Mr. Barnard had no objection to the minuteness of the testimony, since it was all creating its effect, but certain questions must be answered along with it. The audience was giving the narrator the most flattering attention. Evidently nothing was to be omitted from this impartial and photographic account.

"All trou der night, tell dey gon' away."

"When did they go?"

"Dey go ven der sun come oop."

"Why did you stay?"

"Aye 'fraid. Dey bot' young. Dey not know vat life mean."

Profound stillness enveloped the court-room, and the judge shaded his eyes with his hand.

"You wanted to take care of Miss Hastings, then?"

"Yaas, Aye tek care of her." Ludwig blinked and his eyelids fell. No one laughed, and Mr. Barnard's voice softened as he said:

"Go on with your story."

"Mays Molly shay say shay hef a poetry to say to hem. Shay say et an' den gib et to hem 'ret out en paper. He los' et an Aye fine et. Et ben under hays knay. It got gren grass stain on et."

Mr. Barnard here produced a crumpled sheet of paper, which he presented to the witness.

"Is this the paper that you found?"

"Yaas." Ludwig, after making a minute inspection of the sheet, gave his assent.

The sheet was then passed to the judge. After scrutinizing it he handed it back to Barnard, who read

it aloud slowly and impressively, his rich voice filling and overflowing the court-room. The poem, so exquisite in its suggestion, fell upon an audience as still as death. The poor Swede was, after all, the most important witness. The color came back to Jack's face as he listened, and to the general's face as well. There was that in Ludwig's testimony which could not be doubted. When Mr. Barnard reached the last lines of the poem and read:

"If so, at life's set we may see
Into the dark steal noiselessly
Sweet faces that we used to know,
Dear eyes like stars that softly glow,
Dear hands stretched out to point the way
And deem the night more fair than day,"*

*Susan Coolidge.

sobs arose from various parts of the hall. The audience had been strung to concert pitch, and the poor fellow's unselfish devotion, so at odds with his appearance, and the poem, the reading of which had purified the air as might a summer shower, were more than most of those present could bear without display of emotion. The general's eyes were misty, and most of the jurymen had sunk their chins into their palms. Those who had daughters and sisters imagined them in Molly's place, and their hearts went out to her. They became fathers and brothers.

But Ludwig had not finished his tale.

"Shay say," he went on monotonously, "shay tenk her modder an' fadder vatch ofer her, an' shay hope her dear modder waitin' for her ven shay die, rady to tek her han', an' Zjack hay say hay vant to be so goot as hays fadder vas."

Again handkerchiefs were in evidence. Every one

in the court-room knew that Jack Gordon's father had died in prison. Nothing could be seen of the young man's face, for his hand covered the cheek which was turned toward the house.

"Mays Molly shay say," continued Ludwig with endless repetition:

" 'Ve haf a lofly time.'

"Hay say, 'Yaas.'

"Den der moon it come up an' shay 'fraid, at first, but it rise more high an' der tree cover dem wit et shadow."

Ludwig had learned to pronounce "shadow" from hearing Walter Hamilton use the word. Ludwig's specialty nowadays was shadows.

"Den day say more poetry 'bout der moon, an' der stars. Dey say der stars lake gold bees. Hay say ef hay mek goot man, et baycause of her. Den dey talk no more. Shay fall 'sleep, an' ven shay es 'sleep, her hade drap do'n en hay's shoulder. Hay not move till laght come, when hay vake her. Der sky all pink an' gole and beautiful."

Ludwig ceased for a moment and sighed as though in rapture at his memory, his eyes still gazing dreamily at the ceiling.

"Den shay say shay had bad dream, an' shay 'fraid. Shay say shay dream dey bot' drown an' dat dey pray an' some von come en leetle boat. Shay ask hem ef hay vould pray vit her bayfore dey go away, baycause praps dey nefer bay togedder so agen.

"So," ended Ludwig simply, "dey kneel dere an' take der han's togedder an' dey pray, bot' of 'em. Shay pray dat dey bot' be goot, and hay pray to bay strong to stan' pain an' sorrer."

Here Ludwig ended his direct testimony and was

handed over to Mr. Jones, who, be it said to his credit, did little to weaken the evidence. He was convinced of the truth of the story and his cross-questioning was perfunctory. It did not in any way tend to confuse the witness. If anything, it confirmed all that he had previously said.

It was not destined, however, that the defense should continue its triumphant march toward victory unimpeded. Ludwig's testimony had been of such an exceptional nature that not only Jack's sympathizers, but those who knew him only by name, were convinced of his innocence and were ready to cheer for his release. There was not one among the jurymen who had a single doubt left in his mind.

It was at this intensely psychological moment, when a rapid summing up of the case would have achieved immediate success for the defense, that Ludwig, now smiling blandly, thinking to add a little to the pleasant sensation which he had created, succeeded not only in destroying the edifice which he and "Mays Molly" between them had so laboriously reared, but in creating such a wave of emotion in the court-room as had never been created there before. With consummate calmness and deliberation he informed Mr. Jones that upon the night of the twenty-eighth of June Jack Gordon had given his companion a box which had hitherto lain in Mr. Sawyer's safe. He had asked her to hide it for him, and "Mays Molly" had taken it away with her in the morning.

Ludwig had forgotten to mention this fact to Mr. Barnard the night before, even as Molly had forgotten it, since to their minds it had no bearing on the subject. The judge called the audience sharply to order. Ludwig was reexamined by the defense and

then recross-questioned by the prosecution, this time unsparingly. After that Molly was returned to the witness chair, but the grilling to which the district attorney subjected her elicited merely the fact that she had received such a box and, without examining it, had hidden it in the secret cupboard.

Hal started as though electrified.

"The secret cupboard?" Mr. Jones allowed considerable sarcasm to creep into his voice. "And where is this secret cupboard?" he inquired.

"It is over the mantelpiece in the dining-room," replied Molly earnestly. "It is not really a secret cupboard; it was I who called it that, because the top shelf extends two feet farther back than the under one and things can be hidden there. A roll of wall paper lies across it just where the wall comes on the bottom shelf."

In spite of the serious import of the discovery, a slow smile of comprehension spread across Hal's face. How many times had he opened that cupboard door and sniffed delicious odors of gingerbread and chocolate cake and fudge, which had given no more material proof of their presence? How many times had he reluctantly closed that door, vainly endeavoring to persuade himself that his imagination was playing him false, not, however, that it was gingerbread or chocolate cake and fudge that he was after? He had been many years on the quest of the secret cupboard itself. It would have been much more satisfactory, to be sure, had he discovered it alone and unaided, and yet his mind henceforth would be at rest.

It was while Hal was engrossed with thoughts of an entirely private nature that the court-room proceedings came to an abrupt end. Nothing more could

be accomplished until the box referred to by Ludwig and admitted by Molly had been secured. It was ordered that it should be brought into the court-room and opened before the eyes of all present, upon which decision the court adjourned amid much confusion. The opening of the box, which now began to assume the proportions of a veritable treasure-trove, bid fair to provide a fitting climax to the already dramatic situation. Bets were offered and accepted as to its probable contents. Jack Gordon's supporters did not lose heart, but they were rendered uneasy, for the high tide of popular sympathy, upon which they had so confidently relied to float the boy out from his prison walls, had been rudely stemmed.

When the court reopened at half after one o'clock, utter stillness reigned. The box lay in full sight upon the long table on the platform, guarded by the lawyers both of prosecution and of defense. Jack Gordon's face was scarlet, and he sat with eyes upon the floor. The actual opening of the box, the contents of which were to decide its owner's fate, occupied a very few moments. It was Mr. Judkins who performed the act, the key having been secured from the jailer in Hambletown, who had in his keeping such of Jack's effects as had been taken from him at the time of his arrest. The box might contain—anything,—even the missing one thousand dollars. Sheriff Judkins turned the key and threw back the lid. Gravely he raised that which came first into view. It proved to be a bright red hair-ribbon, which he as gravely passed on to Mr. Barnard. After that came two letters addressed to Mr. Jack Gordon and signed "Molly," a small blank book bearing upon the first page, "Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, triumvirate," beneath

which were written exhaustive definitions of the same.

The box contained also a dried rose, a necktie which Molly had made for Jack two years before, and a small worn glove. It was a collection of love tokens that was being desecrated. The audience had not seen what was written in the book, but there could be only one meaning to the red ribbon, a dried rose, and a small glove.

The box was ruled out as evidence without any delay.

Once more excitement began to spread through the gathering, but this time it was a good-natured excitement, which expressed itself in smiles and sympathetic glances,—excitement which the judge found it difficult to put an end to by means of his gavel. Molly hung her head shyly and her cheeks glowed like poppies.

Mr. Barnard's masterly summing up of the defense was as unnecessary as Mr. Jones formal summing up of the case for the prosecution was meaningless. Every one present knew that with the opening of the box Jack Gordon's freedom but awaited the sanction of the jury.

"Told you she was his girl," whispered the farmer's lad to his companion, his eyes glistening sympathetically. "Gee, wisht I wuz in his shoes!"

"He never stole nuthin'," came the reply. "I allers knowed he never did."

"So'd I," returned the other. And the jury came to the same decision the instant that they were alone together. Before they could return to their places, however, a telegram arrived for Mr. Barnard, which he read eagerly, and passed at once to Sheriff Judkins, who rose without comment and left the court-room.

And no sooner had this been accomplished than another missive was conveyed to the lawyer for the defense by an awkward country lad, who, very evidently, had been goaded into making the trip to the platform by other than his own desires.

Barnard had been prepared for the telegram, but the note, evidently sent by some one in the room, occasioned him considerable surprise. When he had read it, however, a sudden light shone from his eyes and his lips grew almost tremulous as he directed his glance toward his client, whose face still showed a painful red. Then he whispered to him a few words of explanation, after which he handed him the letter. While Jack was reading it the jurymen returned, but he neither saw nor heard them. He sat very still, gazing down at the fine old-fashioned writing, unaware that he was a freeman and that his friends were eagerly waiting to clasp his hand.

Jack did not come to himself until the audience was rapped into stillness for a last time as Mr. Barnard rose to speak. That he had some communication of interest to make was quite evident from his face. The crowd grew quiet, and the distinguished lawyer from New York, showing more emotion than was his custom to evince in the pursuit of his calling, told them simply and without rhetorical effect, not only that the real thief, together with his accomplice, Guy Flemming, had been apprehended, but that the father of his client, who had died in prison many years before, was an innocent and upright man, even as was his son, who had come so near to repeating his father's history. Years after the older John Gordon had died, he explained, the man whose sin he had unjustly expiated had, before going to his long account, made confession.

This confession had never reached the ears of John Gordon's wife, because she, together with her infant son, had disappeared from her old home, leaving no trace of her whereabouts.

It was General Wintringham who first clasped Jack Gordon's hand as he descended from the platform, a free man, and when he had finished his little speech of welcome, delivered in a husky and unnatural voice, he laid Molly's hand into that of her lover in a manner which admitted of no misinterpretation. It was with Molly's arm drawn through his that Jack received Mrs. Wintringham's greeting, as well as the greetings of Mrs. Heaton and Eleanor and Walter Hamilton, of Mr. Sawyer, who speechless grasped his hand, of Mrs. von Orth and of Daisy O'Halloran and her husband, and of all the kind folk who gathered about him to give him and his bride-to-be their blessing.

"How did Mr. Barnard learn about your father?" Molly whispered, when at length they were permitted to make their slow way down the central aisle toward the waiting automobiles.

"My father's sister is here," Jack whispered back, his voice vibrating joyously. "She is in gray and will join us at the door. She read about the case in the New York papers and came to the trial. The story about my father made her certain that I was her nephew. All that happened to-day will be in the papers, too. Those men around the table on the floor were reporters."

"I don't care a bit," replied Molly, "do you? Reporters gave you back your faith in your father. I like reporters and I know that I am going to love your aunt."

Jack held Molly's arm tightly. "I like reporters,

too," he replied, "for if it had not been for them I would never have been going to marry you."

"Yes, you would, Jack," they were nearly at the door now, "for two days ago grandfather told me that we could become engaged as soon as you were free. He got all over caring about your father."

"I couldn't have done it even then," Jack made reply. But there was time for nothing more.

Just as she had promised them, at the door stood a little pale-faced lady in a gray traveling dress, exactly the kind of a lady whom one would have chosen for an aunt. She stood on tiptoe when she saw her tall nephew, and taking both of his hands in hers, kissed him.

"I arrived just in the nick of time, didn't I?" she said. "I know all about everything. You may come home whenever it is convenient for you to do so. Your room is the one that your father occupied when he was a boy. Our street is not as fashionable as it was once, still I am sure you will find the location a pleasant one."

Then she turned to Molly.

"And you, my dear, I am most proud and happy to bid welcome."

She kissed her upon the forehead.

Two days had gone by and a deep Sabbath calm brooded over Hambletown. The trial was a thing of the past, as well as was the arrest of Guy Flemming, who had been conveyed to New York to answer to graver charges than the robbery of Mr. Sawyer's safe. Jack had become quite accustomed to the idea of belonging to a distinguished family, of which he was the sole surviving male, with the obligation of living

up to its traditions resting upon his shoulders alone. Miss Gordon had returned to New York the previous day, but she had visited not only at Locust Cottage, but at the Beeches and at Broadhurst as well; and had made it plain that, although she was a woman of only moderate wealth, her nephew Jack would from now on be provided for as befitted a Gordon.

It was Sunday afternoon. Hal was at the Beeches, but the rest of the inhabitants of Locust Cottage were at home. Upon the front porch the general read aloud to his wife from a closely written manuscript dealing with "Some New Aspects of Heredity." Molly and Jack were in their favorite apple tree, screened from all observance by the kindly green leaves. Jack occupied the lower seat, and his head lay against her knees. Through his hair her fingers ran caressingly.

"You are looking better already, Jack dear," she said gently.

Slowly he raised his head and she looked down into his eyes unflinchingly, her hands framing his cheeks. There was nothing in them which she feared to meet.

"Oh, Jack, Jack," she said, "I can scarcely believe it."

"Nor I," he replied.

"And if it hadn't been for being arrested," Molly continued, "we should not be engaged now, should we?"

"No; but it was worth it, sweetheart; worth not only weeks, but months—years of waiting."

"Everything bad," said Molly, "brings something good, doesn't it?"

For reply Jack took both her hands in one of his and allowed his head to fall back to its former resting-place.

"And I should have been abroad by this time," Molly continued. "Instead of that, you are going with us, and so is Mrs. von Orth and Harold, and even Mr. Barnard. Wasn't it lovely in him to want you to be his private secretary?"

"It certainly was," Jack spoke emphatically.

"And even if you do stay only a few weeks, Europe will seem different just because you have been there."

Here Jack carried Molly's hands to his lips and kissed them.

"I shall be willing to leave you when the time comes," he said. "The parting will not be hard now. How I will work! Four years! What are four years?"

"Four years are nothing, nothing at all!" Molly's tone matched his. "And, besides, we shall not remain abroad more than one year, you know. The rest of the time shall be near enough to see each other often, and we'll write everything, won't we?"

"Yes," replied Jack, "everything, that is, that can be placed upon paper."

The afternoon sun sank lower and the perfume-laden air fanned them gratefully. On a near bench a robin sang, "Cheer up! cheer up!" and cocked his head knowingly on one side as he gazed at the pair from out his bright eyes.

"The darling!" Molly laughed softly, "I believe that he understands." But the robin only flitted his wings at them and flew away to his mate.

They sat silent after that, while Ellen's voice in joyful pursuance of her favorite occupation floated out to them from the kitchen door, where she was following the fortunes of a pair of story-book lovers, quite oblivious of the pair of real ones in the old apple tree.

Ellen was to cook for the rector's wife during the Wintringhams' stay abroad, and was as filled with importance at the anticipated change as was Ludwig, who would drive for Dr. Dolliver.

Meanwhile the general had finished reading his essay and sat in dreamy contemplation of the distant landscape.

"A week from to-day," he said, "at this time, we shall not be sitting here."

"We shall not be here," returned his wife cheerfully, "but we shall be together and the children will be with us."

"That is so," returned the old man; and then he added in a changed tone, as though the thought were a new one, "My dear, we have much to be thankful for," to which his wife made heartfelt reply:

"We have indeed."

But the aged pair upon the front porch and the lovers in the apple tree were not the only ones who counted up their mercies. Within the old wash-house, seated upon a three-legged stool and furiously plying his paint-brush, sat one whose gratitude and happiness could find no adequate expression in words. He was no longer "poor Ludwig"; he was a beloved Ludwig, upon whom had been showered both compliment and kindness. His face burned with perpetual blushes and his foolish heart bounded with a rapture that seemed without end. Art alone offered a suitable medium by means of which to vent his emotions. Ludwig was at work upon a portrait of "Mays Molly," for which, out in that same humble studio, she had sat to him only the day before.

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